

ILLUMINATION OF MUSIC

THE WRITINGS OF DYLAN THOMAS

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In this thesis I examine the importance of music in the writings of Dylan Thomas. Thomas grew up in Wales, and he often suggested that his fascination with the sounds of the English language derived from this Welshness. In this thesis, however, I argue that he was a poet first, a performer second, and a Welshman third. Thomas fell in love with the sounds of words from an early age. His ear for the English language lies at the heart of everything that he wrote.

Thomas's early poetry makes considerable use of bold, aggressive sounds. By Deaths and Entrances, however, he is able to use and explore the many subtleties and nuances of language as a musical medium. When Thomas reads his own work, these musical qualities are amplified and fully projected.

Under Milk Wood, his play for voices, is probably the best example of Thomas's ability to create pictures, and evoke feelings, through sound. By the end of his life, his writings had indeed become an illumination of music. In this thesis, I set out to show exactly how this came about, and to explore the relationship between Thomas's writing and music.

## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

The title of this thesis is taken from Thomas's poem "In Country Sleep", the last completed poem in his Collected Poems 1934-1952, first published in 1952:

Illumination of music! the lulled black-backed  
Gull, on the wave with sand in its eyes! And the foal moves  
Through the shaken greensward lake, silent, on moonshod  
hooves,

In the winds' wakes.  
Music of elements, that a miracle makes!

Those readers who are familiar with Thomas's poetry will readily accept his efforts to portray the "music of elements" through the music of words. Those who are unfamiliar with Thomas will soon begin to feel and see the gull in the sound of that simple verb "lulled". Or hear the rhythm of the foal in "on moonshod hooves". It is often suggested that this ability of Thomas, to portray so much through sound, is a miraculous, almost supernatural gift.

In this thesis I want to defy that suggestion. I want to show exactly how Thomas creates this music, how he uses it and, eventually, how he controls it in his writing. This kind of analysis makes use of some basic musical ideas. I have endeavoured to keep these ideas as simple as possible, but where necessary I have added explanatory notes. After all, Thomas was not a musician. His ability to use his voice and his language, however, to maximise the effect of sound,

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1 THOMAS, D. Collected Poems 1934-1952. London, J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1952, p.168. (Hereafter referred to as Collected Poems)

suggests that he had an extremely sensitive ear. In order to clarify the relationship between words and sounds, I have included an Appendix which outlines my use of phonetic vocabulary in this thesis.

A lot of work has been done, in the years since Thomas died, on explaining the literal meaning of his work. Many readers, or listeners, fall in love with the sounds of his language, but the effort required to go beyond that superficial level, and to understand Thomas, is often considered too great. To move beyond the level of loving the sounds of his work, also requires some hard work. But the rewards are considerable. When we can explain and analyse both sound and meaning in Thomas's work, we move onto another dimension of understanding and appreciation. That, surely, is what the study of good literature is about.

To anyone reading this thesis, my advice is simple. Listen! A pair of eyes is not enough, unless you know that your ears are also engaged.

## CHAPTER II

## WELSHMAN OR POET

A number of Welsh writers and critics have emphasized the importance of Thomas's Welshness. John Ackerman and Andrew Sinclair claim Thomas as "one of us", in an introductory note to Ackerman's book Welsh Dylan.<sup>1</sup> Thomas certainly loved Wales. The more time he spent away from his homeland, the more he longed for its comfort and security. He felt happiest writing in a Welsh environment. The park, the hills, the fishing and the sea were things which Thomas liked to have around him, and his writing makes considerable use of these natural images.

Both of the Thomas parents spoke Welsh. Thomas's father, however, suppressed his native language and attempted to eradicate any trace of a Welsh accent in his children, by insisting that they had elocution lessons. Thomas knew no Welsh, but he developed a "cut-glass" accent, and it is rather ironic that it is this vocal quality which appealed most to his audiences in later years. In a radio broadcast in 1949, Thomas satirized his father's attitude:

(I know in London a Welsh hairdresser who has striven so vehemently to abolish his accent that he sounds like a man speaking with the Elgin Marbles in his mouth). They ape the narrow "a". They repudiate the Welsh language, whether they know it or not.<sup>2</sup>

Thomas's father was a Grammar School English master who

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1 ACKERMAN, John. Welsh Dylan London, Granada Publishing Ltd., 1979. cover.

2 THOMAS, Dylan, Quite Early One Morning London, J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1954, p.159.

had tried to write poetry himself. He was determined that his son would reverse the disappointment of his failure. He insisted that Thomas had a sound knowledge and appreciation of contemporary English literature, especially poetry. Thomas's father had a superb reading voice and emphasized the importance of reading poetry aloud. He read Shakespeare to his son from the age of four, when the words were simply floods of sound. He had very good taste in modern writers also, (notably Edward Thomas and D.H. Lawrence) and all the evidence suggests that Thomas's father was the most important literary influence on the young poet.

In his "Poetic Manifesto", Thomas suggests that his father was also instrumental in developing his awareness of sound in words:

The first poems I knew were nursery rhymes, and before I could read them for myself I had come to love just the words of them, the words alone. What the words stood for, symbolized, or meant, was of very secondary importance; what mattered was the sound of them as I heard them for the first time on the lips of the remote and incomprehensible grown-ups who seemed for some reason, to be living in my world. And these words were, to me, as the notes of bells, the sounds of musical instruments, the noises of wind, sea, and rain, the rattle of milk-carts, the clopping of hooves on cobbles, the fingering of branches on a window pane, might be to someone, deaf from birth, who has miraculously found his hearing.<sup>3</sup>

These words remind us of Under Milk Wood where nursery rhymes, and the natural sounds of the town, are so important. Thomas always likes to use words in fresh and interesting ways, and he often conveys this freshness through a child-like sense of discovery. The idea of a deaf person being miraculously cured vividly captures this idea of a child awakening

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3 In Dylan Thomas: Early Prose Writings (ed. Walford Davies) London, J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1971. p.154. (Thomas's italics)

In his broadcast titled "Reminiscences of Childhood", Thomas describes what it was like to have been brought up in Swansea:

This sea town was my world; outside a strange Wales, coal-pitted, mountained, river run, full so far as I knew, of choirs and football teams and sheep and story-books, tall black hats and red flannel petticoats, moved about its business which was none of mine.

Beyond that unknown Wales with its wild names like peals of bells in the darkness, and its mountain men clothed in the skins of animals perhaps and always singing, lay England which was London...<sup>4</sup>

Thomas's memory is inevitably associated with sound. It is important to realise, however, that the Wales of choirs and singing and Welsh language was "unknown" and unreal to him. The sounds that really mattered were the sounds of the sea and the park "quite near where I lived, so near that on summer evenings I could listen, in my bed, to the voices of other children playing ball on the sloping, paper-littered bank".<sup>5</sup> It was here, in the park, that Thomas's first poems were conceived and written:

Where could I ever listen for the sound of seas asleep,  
Or the cold and graceful song of a swan that dies  
and wakes,  
Where could I ever hear the cypress speak in its  
sleep,  
And cling to a manhood of flowers, and sing  
the unapproachable lakes? <sup>6</sup>

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4 Quite Early One Morning p.9.

5 Dylan Thomas Miscellany London, J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd.,  
1963. p.87.

6 Ibid, p.90.



The answer was, of course, the park. Thomas never forgot this idyllic environment. It is there in Under Milk Wood as the wind-shaken wood. It is also the setting of a much later, well-known poem, "The Hunchback in the Park".

Thomas loved to read this poem, and he included it in his "Reminiscences of Childhood" broadcast. The poem contains a few direct references to the sounds of the park, and the "truant boys" taunting the hunchback. Most of the music, however, is implied in Thomas's choice of language, and his awareness of the sounds inherent in words. "The Sunday sombre bell at dark", for instance, is an extremely sensitive cadence to the first stanza. The short vowels of "sun"-, "som"-, and "bell" give way to the long, hollow, ringing sound of the long vowel in "dark". This progression is reinforced by the simple use of alliterative "s" and "b" sounds. "Dark" has none of this in common with the words which precede it. The important sounds in "Sunday - sombre bell" are the nasal "n" and "m" sounds, followed by the liquid "ll". The warmth of the "n" in Sunday diminishes gradually through the "m" and "ll" sounds, and "dark", with its emphasis on the hollow "ar" sound, is cold and exposed. The rhyming of "park" and "dark" further reinforces this coldness. The strong implication of all this is that the longer the bell rings, the more sombre it becomes. Thomas uses this same rhyme in the final stanza, to emphasize the loneliness and degradation of the hunchback's life.

Both "The Hunchback in the Park" and the very early poem quoted above, show how aware Thomas was of natural and poetic sounds. The use of those sounds, however, has become extremely sensitive and refined in the later poem. By

quoting the two poems together in his broadcast, he dramatizes the development that his poetry has undergone.

Thomas often referred to his childhood and his Welshness, especially in his later poetry and broadcasts. "Reminiscences of Childhood", however, probably tells us more about the adult Thomas than about the young boy in Swansea. He remembers events and incidents of his early life, and relates them in a bold, comic style. But when, at the end of the broadcast, he speaks of "the fine, live people, the spirit of Wales itself", we cannot fully accept his sincerity. The older Thomas became, the more he wanted to embrace his Welshness. His early poetry, stories, and articles, however, suggest that he didn't know what it was to be Welsh. The burning ambition, that drove Thomas for many years, was to become a poet of the English language. It was only in later life that he realised his Welshness set him apart from other poets, and was a useful part of his public image.

In a talk called "Welsh Poets", Thomas identifies himself as a poet first. He warns his audience against using academic classifications like "Anglo-Welsh" for poets:

The position - if poets must have positions, other than upright - of the poet born in Wales or of Welsh parentage and writing his poems in English today made by many people unnecessarily, and trivially difficult... Welshmen have written, from time to time, exceedingly good poetry in English. I should like to think that that is because they were, and are, good poets rather than good Welshman. It's the poetry, written in the language which is most natural to the poet, that counts, not his continent, country, island, race, class or political persuasion.<sup>7</sup>

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7 Quite Early One Morning p.139.

Thomas was certainly influenced by other poets who were Welsh. In his broadcast on Welsh poets, Thomas identifies W.H. Davies as a particular influence on his own writing. Davies was something of a Bohemian, who tramped through America as a hobo and was educated, purely by chance. This certainly appealed to Thomas's rather romantic ideas on poets. Thomas describes his poetry as "fresh and simple and assured". He identifies Davies' strength as his ability to observe, and capture in verse, "all the inhabitants of his small and pure world".<sup>8</sup> Davies writes with sensitivity about tiny things such as birds, clouds, animals and plants. We can see his influence in such poems as "The Hunchback in the Park", but it is a limited influence which Thomas quickly outgrew.

As he matured, Thomas turned more and more to Vernon Watkins, a close friend from Swansea. Thomas admired Watkins as a poet:

I think him to be the most profound and  
greatly accomplished Welshman writing poems in  
English.<sup>9</sup>

In his broadcast titled "Return Journey", Thomas and Watkins are associated in an assault on literary London. Passerby says:

Vernon Watkins and Young Thomas write the most  
boiling poems, how they would ring the bells of  
of London and paint it like a tart...<sup>10</sup>

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8 Quite Early One Morning p.145.

9 Ibid, p.180.

10 Ibid, p.82.

Watkins and Thomas first met after the publication of 18 Poems, Thomas's first published volume. They met regularly to discuss their writing, and remained close friends until Thomas's death. The correspondence between the two poets suggests that Watkins' comments and suggestions for revision were taken very seriously by Thomas. Thomas trusted Watkins because as poets, they had a great deal in common. They both loved rhetoric, they both emphasized sound in their writing, and they both used a lot of religious and biblical imagery. The Welsh Nonconformist movement was an important influence on both Thomas and Watkins, an influence which they could never lay aside.

Thomas's great uncle, William, was both a preacher and a bard, and his family took their religion very seriously. In The Story of Wales, Rhys Davies speaks of "the great preachers of Wales, the seasonal preaching congresses reminiscent of bardic meetings, and that singing or chanting eloquence known as 'hwyl' ".<sup>11</sup> 'Hwyl' is a style of speaking used both in English and Welsh, a passionate chanting of words which aims directly at the hearts of the listeners. There is certainly an element of this in Thomas's poetry reading, as we shall see later in this thesis.

The Welsh are also famous for their love of singing hymns. The powerful emotions associated with hymn-singing are movingly portrayed by Gerraint Goodwin in his novel The Heyday in the Blood:

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11 DAVIES, R. The Story of Wales. Lond, W. Collins, Sons & Co. Ltd., 1943. p.24.

And then, like the wind gathering in a howl, 11  
came the slow, unearthly cadences of a hymn;  
it began, slow, inevitable, gathering strength just as  
the wind; as wild and pitiless as the wind. It has no  
place, like the wind... It was like some dark, clouded 12  
flame, leaping up in its sombre beauty, remote and pure.

Thomas's poetry often attempts to match the intensity of feeling and sound which Goodwin describes. Welsh Nonconformity created a fervent and introspective religious climate, and Thomas matched this in his writing. The Bible is an important source of imagery in his work, and the battling of a Puritan conscience is often at the heart of his most dramatic writing. Thomas often seems to be obsessed with personal sin and damnation, but to the Nonconformists, this was reality.

In ancient Wales or Ireland, a poet was acknowledged to exercise a considerable amount of spiritual power. This bardic tradition continues in parts of Wales today, but it is always associated with Welsh language and strict, traditional verse forms. It is impossible to say how important this influence really was on Thomas's writing. Superficially, at least, Thomas had a lot in common with these bards.

In his broadcast called "Welsh Poets", Thomas talks briefly about Dafydd ap Gwilym, a contemporary of Chaucer, and Henry Vaughan who was born in 1622. He was, at least, aware of the importance of the bardic tradition in the development of poetry in Wales. The bulk of the broadcast, however, is devoted to five poets who lived in the twentieth century, and all had written in English. This suggests that Thomas was more interested in modern, English poetry, the

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12 GOODWIN, G. The Heyday in the Blood London, Penguin Books, 1954. p.124.

Welsh bardic poetry was, and still is, written in elaborate metres and very strict sound schemes. It requires a disciplined devotion to the art of composing verse. Thomas certainly had this devotion to his craft, as we shall see when we begin to look more carefully at his poetry. The "Author's Prologue", for instance, has a concentric rhyme scheme, which is sustained through its entire one hundred and two lines.

The bardic tradition is also concerned with the glamour and ritual of being a bard. Every year, at the Welsh eisteddfod, a primitive rite is celebrated which gives the bard certain spiritual powers. This Welsh eisteddfod is a feast of Welshness for writers, poets and playwrights who write in the Welsh language. Thomas could never participate in this festival, but there is an element of this bardic personality in the image he liked to project to his public. He believed that a poem should look like a poem, and sound like a poem, and in his later life, he did his best to look like a poet, to act like a poet, and to sound like a poet. Thomas's personal flamboyance, however, probably owes as much to Romantic English poetry and art, as it does to bardic exuberance.

In his poem "In My Craft or Sullen Art", Thomas examines the tension, in his own writing, between the flamboyance, and sheer hard work, of writing poetry. In this poem, he insists that writing is often a thankless task. There is a lot of personal truth in this, for Thomas, who struggled to remain solvent for most of his life.

|                                      |    |
|--------------------------------------|----|
| In my craft or sullen art            | A  |
| Exercised in the still night         | B  |
| When only the moon rages             | C  |
| And the lovers lie abed              | D  |
| With all their griefs in their arms, | A' |
| I labour by singing light            | B  |
| Not for ambition or bread            | D  |
| Or the strut and trade of charms     | A' |
| On the ivory stages                  | C  |
| But for the common wages             | C  |
| Of their most secret heart.          | A  |

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The opening line emphasized the loneliness of the poet's vocation. "Exercised", "labour", "trade" and "wages", however, suggest that this job, like any other, is measured in the marketplace. Thomas insists that he is writing for the lovers, who share the still night with him. In this stanza, he denies any commercial motives, rejecting the "strut and trade of charms/On the ivory stages". He suggests that he is disinterested in that kind of public.

In the second stanza, he repeats his claim that he writes poetry for the lovers, the ordinary men and women of the world. The end of the poem, however, completely undermines this claim, and presents the reader with a final irony:

|                                    |    |
|------------------------------------|----|
| Not for the proud man apart        | A  |
| From the raging moon I write       | B  |
| On these spindrift pages           | C  |
| Nor for the towering dead          | D  |
| With their nightingales and psalms | A' |
| But for the lovers, their arms     | A' |
| Round the griefs of the ages,      | C  |
| Who pay no praise or wages         | C  |
| Nor heed my craft or art.          | A  |

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The poet rejects the influence of "the towering dead", the bards, as well as the great figures of Romantic poetry. But in the final lines, Thomas admits that the lovers will probably not even read his poems. They will never buy his books, or hear him read, and Thomas needs an audience. He needs financial support or "wages" to keep him alive and writing. More importantly, though, he needs an audience because he needs some kind of feedback. He needs people to tell him that his labour is appreciated, and that the effort involved in polishing his poems is worthwhile.

This poem is, itself, an excellent example of Thomas's craftsmanship. Counting syllables reveals that virtually every line has exactly seven syllables. The only exceptions to this are at the end of each stanza and in the third line of the second stanza. In each case, the more regular six syllable line creates a slight cadence. The regular rhythm and strong rhyme of the final lines in each stanza create a particularly strong ending to the poem, which emphasizes the final irony. The repetition of "art" from the opening line stresses, even further, the completeness of the poem.

Thomas also makes use of a very clear rhyme scheme in this poem. The rhyme scheme of the first five, and last four lines of the opening stanza is completely adopted in the second stanza. "Art", "wages" and "arms" are simply repeated to create rhymes in the second stanza. These words gain extra importance from this repetition.

Thomas's use of assonance and alliteration are also very significant. The open "a" sound of "craft", "sullen" and "art" is used a great deal in the poem. It adds even



further weight to the first and last lines of the poem, and creates an element of tension between "craft" and "art". Alliteration is particularly significant in the connection between "lovers lie abed" with "I labour by singing light". This is a simple technique to emphasize the idea that the poet's labour is for the lovers. Thomas is careful to separate these lines and to avoid overdoing the "l" sound. Thomas tends to use alliteration sparingly or to disguise it, because he is able to use so many other techniques to exploit the sound of words.

In spite of all these restrictions on the poet, "In My Craft or Sullen Art" still sounds natural, and flows from line to line. The poem's message is effectively elevated by the tight control of rhythm and sound, and the final dramatic twist is fully exploited. This poem is, I believe, an excellent example of the craftsmanship in Thomas's work.

Thomas's first concern was with writing good poetry. His father made sure that he knew his English literature, and that he was aware of the importance of sound in poetry. Thomas's exposure to Welsh preaching, hymn-singing and bardic traditions certainly had some effect on the young man. Most of Thomas's Welshness, however, developed as a response to his reading and listening public. The fact that Thomas was born in Wales gave his flamboyance an element of romance. In his later works, and in his broadcasts, he exploited this Welshness to the full. The Wales that had most effect upon Thomas, however, was the natural environment which surrounded him in his youth. This is the microcosm of Thomas's early poetry, and much of his later work, too.

CHAPTER III  
IN LOVE WITH WORDS

In his "Poetic Manifesto", Thomas describes his earliest poetry in terms of a love-affair with words:

I fell in love - that is the only expression I can think of - at once, and am still at the mercy of words...I tumbled for words at once. And, when I began to read the nursery rhymes for myself, and, later, to read other verses and ballads, I knew that I had discovered the most important things, to me, that could be ever. <sup>1</sup>

Thomas's first book of poems, 18 Poems, appeared in 1934, when Thomas was only nineteen years of age. The most striking quality of these poems is their freshness and originality, and in them Thomas displays his ability to exploit words for both sound and meaning. This young man's love of the language is abundantly evident, and most critics thought it important enough to demand comment.

In 18 Poems, Thomas's use of poetic sound is at a comparatively crude stage. He seems to be striving for big, dramatic effects using a lot of repetition, and a lot of hard consonant sounds. Thomas tends to emphasize bold, aggressive verbs in these poems, the "verbs of will" as he calls them in "From Love's First Fever to her Plague":<sup>2</sup>

I learnt the verbs of will, and had my secret;  
The code of night tapped on my tongue;  
What had been one was many sounding minded.

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1 Poetic Manifesto p.154-5.

2 Collected Poems p.18.

Much of the imagery in this volume is associated with the foetus, the child and with youth. Thomas stresses the ability of children to discover and explore the natural world around them. He also emphasizes the apparent miracle of human development:

And the four winds, that had<sup>long</sup> blown as one,  
Shone in my ears the light of sound,  
Called in my eyes the sound of light.

It is interesting and significant to see light and sound associated in this way. Thomas puts "the light of sound" first, stressing the importance of hearing to the development of the other senses. Throughout this volume we find examples of sound giving birth to sight and vision, and this is echoed in Thomas's poetic technique.

The first poem I am going to examine in detail is "Especially When The October Wind".<sup>3</sup> The opening of this poem is strikingly original and evocative:

Especially when the October wind  
With frosty fingers punishes my hair,  
Caught by the crabbing sun I walk on fire  
And cast a shadow crab upon the land,  
By the sea's side, hearing the noise of birds,  
Hearing the raven cough in winter sticks,  
My busy heart who shudders as she talks  
Sheds the syllabic blood and drains her words.

The first line sets the scene, and Thomas makes us feel the sharp wind blowing through it. The cold "s" and "ci" sounds of "especially" are followed by the breathy alliteration of "when" and "wind". Thomas captures the wind in his hair superbly with his use of "frosty fingers". The visual image

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3 Collected Poems p.15.

is reinforced by the aural emphasis on cold "f" and "s" sounds. There is further alliteration in the following lines which emphasizes the association of "caught", "crabbing", "cast" and "crab". The stress on "caught" at the beginning of the line suggests that Thomas sees the crab as an image of cancer and destruction. He also implies a homophonic association with grabbing.

The second half of the stanza focuses directly on the sounds of this particular environment. "Hearing the noise of birds" is vague and ordinary. But "the raven cough in winter sticks" is a powerful, and interesting use of poetic sound. "Cough" seems to catch in the reader's throat, and the emphasis on the hard plosive "c" sound prepares us for "sticks". The "cough", in fact, "sticks" in the throat and the mind of the reader. The following line is dominated by the verb "shudders" which links with "sheds" of the final line. All of these sounds are cold and hard, and filled with "syllabic blood". The emphasis is, as we anticipated, on aggressive verbs, and hard consonant sounds. Apart from the occasional lapse, however as in "hearing the noise of birds", the sounds are totally appropriate to the context of the poem.

The second stanza moves from the external world, to the inner environment of the poet, himself. Thomas emphasizes that writing poetry is a lonely task. He struggles to portray the world that he knows, in verbal terms:

Shut, too, in a tower of words, I mark  
 On the horizon walking like <sup>the</sup> trees  
 The worl'd'y shapes of women, and the rows  
 Of the star-gestured children in the park.

"Shut" provides an aural link with "sheds" and "shudders" of the first stanza. Thomas stresses the isolation of this word by cutting it off with a comma. By placing the next verb "mark" at the end of the line, he completely breaks up the flowing rhythm of the first stanza. Once again, the separation of "I mark" at the end of this line intensifies the focus. The link between observing and writing is cleverly captured in this pun. The poet marks or heeds what is going on, then marks his page with a pen. The homophonic association of "wordy" and "worldy" continues this line of thought.

The second half of this stanza creates a strong aural focus on the voices that the poet hears:

Some let me make you of the vowelled beeches,  
 Some of the oaken voices, from the roots,  
 Of many a thorny shire tell you notes,  
 Some let me make you of the water's speeches.

These lines make considerable use of verbal echo and repetition. "Some" is a warm, nasal, humming sound, which slows the poetry down. The heavy rhyming of "beeches" and "speeches" gives these lines a convincing finality, and the association of these words underlines the poem's main concern. The trees of the park come alive with sound. The use of "notes" suggests both the poet's jottings and the musical notes which the poet hears. There is a clear link, here, with "mark" from the first line of the stanza. "Mark" is also linked, aurally, with "make" of "some let me make you". The "vowelled beeches", "oaken voices", "water's speeches" and "thorny shire" are all carefully chosen epithets which emphasize the aural nature of things being described.

In the third stanza, Thomas considers the world in

relation to time. Firstly, he thinks of mechanical time which is measured by clocks and calendars:

Behind a pot of ferns the wagging clock  
Tells me the hour's word, the neural meaning  
Flies on the shafted disk, declaims the morning  
And tells the windy weather in the cock.

The poet resists adherence to this artificial measurement of time. The clock is hidden behind a pot of ferns and the sound of "wagging" suggests a muffled kind of ticking. The church clock "declaims the morning" with a precise chime, but the poet's day is measured in words and thoughts. The repetition of "tells" from the second stanza suggests that this word has several meanings. Homophonic association with bells and tolls (put them together if you like) implies that the word is far more musical than the normal meaning suggests.

Thomas moves quickly to natural time as it is measured by seasons and grass:

Some let me make you of the meadow's signs;  
The signal grass that tells me all I know  
Breaks with the wormy winter through the eye,  
Some let me tell you of the raven's sins.

The continued use of "some let me..." turns this phrase into a kind of musical motif, a repeated pattern of sound. The use of "make" and "tells" again further emphasizes the link between poem and sound. The crucial verb of these lines, "breaks" is connected with "make" through assonance and internal alliteration. The hard sounds of "breaks" are used to introduce the idea of the cruel inevitability of death. The laboured alliteration of "w" s which follow, and the repetition of "th" sounds, slow the line considerably. Through sound, Thomas

is able to suggest that death is inescapable. And in the final line, the profusion of "s" sounds in "raven's sins" reminds us of Eden, and the snake. The raven is a symbol of death, ill omen, and the fall of man.

In the last stanza, Thomas brings the many themes of the poem together, and shapes them into a powerful climax:

Especially when the October wind  
 (Some let me make you of autumnal spells,  
 The spider-tongued, and the loud hill of Wales)  
 With fists of turnips punishes the land,  
 Some let me make you of the heartless words.  
 The heart is drained that, spelling in the scurry  
 Of chemic blood, warned of the coming fury.  
 By the sea's side hear the dark-vowelled birds.

Firstly, this is a climax of poetic and natural sound. The "hill of Wales" is alive with the sounds of birds, the wind, the sea, of turnips, and, of course, of words. Thomas uses the "some let me make you..." motif again in this stanza to add weight to the impending climax of sound. His ability to combine assonance and alliteration to create a very heavy emphasis on certain sounds, is clearly exemplified in "with fists of turnips punishes". The repetition of the short "i" vowel occurs four times in these five words, and the use of "sts", "ps" and "shes" creates a conglomeration of fricative sounds. This image is also visually compelling, and the sounds serve to dramatize its effectiveness.

The stanza drives towards "the coming fury", a powerful sexual climax. The alliteration of hard "c" sounds in "scurry", "chemic" and "coming" creates a feeling of impending climax. Most of the build-up, however, is dependent upon Thomas's use of rhythm. The pace quickens, the words begin to tumble into each other, and a climax at "fury" is inevitable. The final

line expresses both exhaustion and sadness, after this intense physical release. The use of long, soft sounds in "by the sea's side" creates a heavy, subsiding feeling. The string of monosyllabic words slows the poem right down, and at the end we hear the sad call of the "dark-vowelled birds". In that final image, Thomas reminds us once again of the link between the birds, his words, and the sounds that they both make.

Thomas's early poetry is often concerned with the conflict between human flesh and a Puritan conscience. "If I were tickled by the rub of love"<sup>4</sup> is a poem which attempts to come to terms with this conflict. Thomas makes considerable use of human sounds in this poem, and he explores the way we use words to describe these sounds:

If I were tickled by the rub of love,  
A rooking girl who stole me for her side,  
Broke through her straws, breaking my bandaged string,  
If the red tickle as the cattle calve  
Still set to scratch a laughter from my lung,  
I would not fear the apple nor the flood  
Nor the bad blood of spring.

The conflict of the poem is spelt out in its title. The verbs "tickled" and "rub" echo the twin themes of death and sex, "rub" being a clear reminder of Hamlet's suicide soliloquy. The imperfect assonance of "the rub of love" suggests a friction of sound which is continually reinforced in the poem. "Hatching", "scratch", "itch", "chalk", "urchin", "watch" and "straws" all emphasize hard, fricative sounds. In the third stanza, Thomas focuses on the nature of this tension:

I would not fear the muscling -in of love  
If I were tickled by the urchin hungers  
Rehearsing heat upon a raw-edged nerve.



The desire for sex is balanced by fear, guilt, and reminders of death. Thomas's repetition of harsh phrases and sounds creates a "raw-edged nerve" in all his readers.

As the poem drives towards a growing obsession with death, the conglomeration of hard consonants becomes even more intense:

The knobbly ape that swings along his sex  
 From damp love-darkness and the nurse's twist  
 Can never raise the midnight of a chuckle,  
 Nor when he finds a beauty in the breast  
 Of lover, mother, lovers, or his six  
 Feet in the rubbing dust.

The heavily underlined assurance of "darkness", "chuckle" "lover", "mother", "lovers" and "rubbing" creates an awesome emphasis on "dust". Typical of Thomas's cleverness is his use of a six-syllable line at the end of the stanza to underline his use of "six feet" in reference to the grave.

In the poem's final stanza, a series of rhetorical questions are answered with a bold statement. Thomas asks his reader to hear and feel the death in the words he chooses:

The words of death are dryer than his stiff,  
 My wordy wounds are printed with your hair.  
 I would be tickled by the rub that is:  
 Man be my metaphor.

The progression from "words" to "wordy wounds" shows the poet trying to pierce the reader with his language. "Stiff" is carefully chosen to portray the dryness of death through sound. The use of fricatives at either end of the word, surrounding a short vowel, emphasizes grating sounds. Assonance links "stiff" with "printed" and "tickled", the

crucial verbs of the following lines.

The final lines do not provide any resolution to the conflict outlined in the poem. Thomas views all human experience as a process of continual flux and charge, and at the end of the poem, the "rub" and "tickle" still torment him. The final line is a rhetorical gesture which provides no answers, but simply takes us back to the beginning of the poem. "If I were tickled by the rub of love" is a poem which explores man as a metaphor, and insists that the only certainty in man's existence is that of death.

In his early poetry, Thomas is also very interested in the world of the womb. "Before I Knocked"<sup>5</sup> deals with the relationship between birth and mortality. This poem focuses on delicate, sensuous images, the experiences of a tiny, helpless foetus:

Before I knocked and flesh let enter,  
With liquid hands tapped on the womb,  
I who was shapeless as the water  
That shaped the Jordan near my home  
Was brother to Mnetha's daughter  
And sister to the fathering worm.

The opening stanza makes considerable use of warm nasal and liquid sounds. The nasal "m" and "n" sounds come together in the word "Mnetha", serving also to unite "brother" and "sister" in a spiritual and sexual embrace. The obvious lack of hard consonants, coupled with the use of long vowel sounds, gives this stanza a quality of intimacy. The sounds of the womb are muffled, but close.

In the second stanza, Thomas focuses directly on the

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5 Collected Poems p.6.

foetus's ability to feel and hear sound. In these lines, sound and meaning are carefully linked:

I who was deaf to spring and summer,  
 Who knew not sun nor moon by name,  
 Felt thud beneath my flesh's armour  
 As yet was in a molten form,

The first line's emphasis is on "deaf", and Thomas creates this through rhythm and sound. The plosive "d" of "deaf" is the hardest consonant in the line, and the fricative "f" distinguishes the word further. The second line is absolutely full of soft harmonies. There are no fewer than eight nasal "m" and "n" sounds in the line. Thomas also adds assonance to this effect in "who", "know" and "moon" which emphasize long, soothing vowel sounds. The beginning of the third line, then, is a total contrast to the sounds which precede it. The word "felt" has to be separated from "thud" because of the stop at the end of the word. This breaks the smooth rhythm of the verse, and intensifies the focus on the word which follows: the "thud" is both felt and heard. It also has to be separated from what follows because of the stop at the end. In this context, Thomas doesn't need to use a profusion of hard consonants. The fricative "th" of "thud" is strong enough to be felt, yet tender enough to maintain the delicacy of the womb.

Thomas's use of nasal and liquid sounds throughout the poem suggest the warm liquid environment which he is trying to portray. At times his use of poetic sound is extremely sensitive:

The rack of dreams my lily bones  
 Did twist into a living cipher.

The liquid "l" sounds in "lily" capture the fragility of the image. Assonance and alliteration provide a clear link with "twist", "into" and "living" in the next line. Clearly, the clipped "i" vowel also adds to the delicacy of the poetry.

On the other hand, Thomas is occasionally guilty of over-dramatizing his message.

My heart knew love, my belly hunger;  
I smelt the maggot in my stool.

The reference to death is certainly unambiguous, but the crude use of "maggot in my stool" is completely inappropriate in the sensitive environment of the womb. The next stanza defines birth and death in terms of time. Thomas's use of rhythm attempts to describe the ebb and flow of the sea.

And time cast forth my mortal creature  
To drift or drown upon the seas  
Acquainted with the salt adventure  
Of tides that never touch the shores.  
I who was rich was made the richer  
By sipping at the vine of days.

The first line has nine syllables, while the second has only eight, and the repeated use of this pattern tends to suggest the motion of the sea. Each nine-syllable line is slightly rushed, while each eight-syllable line is more relaxed and regular. Thomas emphasizes this effect in this stanza by using imperfect rhymes at the end of each nine-syllable line. "Creature" "adventure" and "richer" all carry accents on the penultimate syllable, which further weakens the rhyme.

The first line in the following stanza is a telling

contrast. The tone is rhetorical, the consonants are hard, and the rhythm is fragmented and irregular:

I, born of flesh and ghost, was neither  
A ghost nor man, but mortal ghost.

The repetition of "ghost" heavily underlines the poet's association with Christ. The urgency of these lines emphasizes the poet's belief that all things are related and united in death. Thomas stresses "I" throughout this stanza, and focuses on the inevitability of his own death.

In the final stanza, Thomas reverses this introspection and speaks on behalf of all men:

You who bow down at cross and altar,  
Remember me and pity Him  
Who took my flesh and bone for armour  
And doublecrossed my mother's womb.

He asks all believers to "remember" mankind and to "pity" Christ. The prayerful tone, however, is shattered by the final two lines. Thomas accepts the life and death of "flesh and bone", but he cannot believe in the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. The sensitivity of the poem's opening stanzas has been lost in this rhetorical outburst. Although Thomas creates a thematic link between his mother's womb, and the Virgin Birth, there is no link in sound or tone. Had Thomas been a humble man, he might have turned this poem into a moving and sensitive statement on the relationship between birth and death. That, however, was not to be, but it is interesting to consider this poem in the light of his use of sound in Deaths and Entrances.

The final poem that I want to examine from 18 Poems is

"The Force that through the Green Fuse drives the Flower"<sup>6</sup>.

This poem makes considerable use of repeated words, phrases and rhythms. The poem's theme of destruction is powerfully portrayed in Thomas's use of verbs:

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower  
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees  
Is my destroyer.  
And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose  
My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.

The first verb "drives" is full of life and vigour, but in the second line, Thomas associates it with the process of ageing. This paradox is reinforced by the poet's use of "green". In the first line, "the green fuse" is the life-giving force, but in the second line it suggests unripeness and inexperience. The strong plosive sound of "blasts" emphasizes the idea of death and destruction, and in the final line, the "wintry fever" spells out the inevitable end to the poet's youth. The progression from "fuse" to "flower" to "fever" is underlined by a simple use of alliteration.

The penultimate line in this stanza is a very important linking device in the poem. "And I am dumb to tell" is used in every stanza, except the second, where "tell" is replaced by "mouth". This phrase acts as a musical motif in the same way that "some let me make you" does in "Especially when the October wind". The warm nasal "m" and "n" sounds create a humming warmth which is, in this case, a marked contrast with the theme of death and destruction. The anti-thesis of "dumb to tell" then, is matched by the juxtaposition of soft, warm sounds with hard, cold sounds. In this way, Thomas underlines the dramatic impact of "the crooked rose".

Thomas uses a considerable amount of deliberate undercutting in this poem. In the second stanza, the opening statement is quickly undermined:

The force that drives the water through the rocks  
 Drives my red blood; that dries the mouthing streams  
 Turns mine to wax.

In the first line, Thomas uses drives to suggest the power of a natural phenomenon. In the second line, however, the verb becomes "dries" and even the stream is subject to destruction.

In the third stanza, the process of destruction seems to be taking over:

The hand that whirls the water in the pool  
 Stirs the quicksand; that ropes the blowing wind  
 Hauls my shroud sail.

The verb "whirls" is undermined by its association with "pool". "Ropes" is also undercut by the reference to "shroud". The choice of "whirls" in the opening line provides links of sound with both "stirs" and "hauls", and the tone, though less rhetorical, has become more urgent.

In the final stanza, Thomas attempts to overcome this accelerated awareness of death, by escaping through sex and love:

The lips of time leech to the fountain head;  
 Love drips and gathers, but the fallen blood  
 Shall calm her sores.  
 And I am dumb to tell a weather's wind  
 How time has ticked a heaven round the stars.

The alliteration of "lips", "leech" and "love" suggest how

futile this is. The poet creates a "heaven" of the flesh,<sup>30</sup> but the images of disease emphasize how unreal that "heaven" really is.

In the final two lines, Thomas makes further use of the motif that has occurred in each of the preceding stanzas.

And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb  
How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm.

The association of "dumb" and "tomb" emphasizes the long, hollow vowel. Thomas's use of an imperfect rhyme at the end of the poem undermines any suggestion of harmony or peace in love. The association between "tomb" and "womb" is implied, but the use of "worm" creates a stronger emphasis on the finality of death. All of this suggests an ambivalence surrounding Thomas's repeated use of "dumb". Although the nasal "m" is warm, the hollow vowel creates an echo of "tomb" and "doom". In this poem, Thomas shows how much importance he places on individual sounds to emphasize his message, the paradox of creation and destruction.

In 18 Poems, Thomas's awareness and use of sound is already highly developed. He tends, however, to write more consistently using bold, aggressive sounds, particularly hard-hitting verbs. His use of plosive and fricative consonants creates a lot of powerful, emotive language. In "Before I Knocked", Thomas displays a limited ability to use sensitive and subtle sounds, but he is unable to sustain this effect throughout the poem. In Deaths and Entrances, however, Thomas is able to manipulate a full range of emotions through sound, and his poetry gains a great deal from this.



## CHAPTER IV

## DEATHS AND ENTRANCES

Deaths and Entrances was first published in 1946, twelve years after the appearance of 18 Poems. In the intervening years, Thomas had begun to broadcast widely, and his use of this medium forced him to listen very carefully to what he was doing with words:

I am trying for more clarity now. At first I thought it enough to leave an impression of sound and feeling and let the meaning seep in later, but since I have been giving these broadcasts and reading other men's poetry as well as my own, I find it better to have more meaning at first reading. 1

As we have seen, Thomas's early poetry tends to sacrifice clarity in striving for big, dramatic effects. His later poetry, however, is marked by the lucidity of the language, and a highly developed awareness of the subtleties of poetic sound.

Deaths and Entrances contains many of Thomas's best-known poems, the poems that he loved to read and his audiences demanded to hear. The tone of these poems is more lyrical and relaxed. The poet is often close to prayer, pleading gently with God, rather than confronting him. These poems provide an excellent contrast with the work in 18 Poems, and in examining them closely, we can see how much Thomas has learnt about the relationship between words and sounds, in the intervening twelve years.

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1 Quite Early One Morning p.vii.

"A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London"<sup>2</sup> opens with a strong, rhetorical outburst. There is no punctuation until the first sentence ends in the third stanza, and Thomas read these lines as a relentless incantation:

Néver until the mánkind máking  
 Bírd béast and flówer  
 Fáthering and all húmbling dárkness  
 Télls with sílence the lást light bréaking  
 And the stíll hóur  
 Is cóme of the séa túmbling in hárnass

This opening statement is highly ritualised, and makes extensive use of Old Testament imagery and ideas. Allusions to the opening chapter of Genesis associate the death of the child with a return to the darkness of the void. John Ackerman suggests that this poem is "the best example of Thomas as a preacher in verse".<sup>3</sup> Thomas's recording of this poem certainly supports his suggestion. He does not allow his voice to recede at all, until the third stanza.

In the second stanza, Thomas's greater awareness of small sounds is captured in his image of an "ear of corn":

And the synagogue of the ear of corn  
 Shall I let pray the shadow of a sound...

The poet is awake to the tiny sounds of the natural world, and he uses more subtle techniques to evoke these sounds. He asks his readers to hear the silence and the shadows of sound, to hear the prayers, as well as the sermons. He insists that

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2 Collected Poems p.94.

3 Dylan Thomas London, Oxford University Press, 1964. p.116.

language can be both delicate and powerful, and in this poem he explores the tension between these two poles.

In the third stanza, the poet becomes warmer and more compassionate towards the dead child. He must accept her death, but he also must recognise the suffering that she has been through:

I shall not murder  
The mankind of her going with a grave truth  
Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath  
With any further  
Elegy of innocence and youth.

Thomas's repetition of "mankind" from the opening stanza helps to suggest that her death is significant on a universal scale. The alliteration of "majesty", "mankind" and "murder" suggest that we are both responsible and responsive to her death. When we split "mankind" into "man" and "kind", we also reveal the pun, although she is a girl. "Kind" suggests the pity that we must feel, and "grave" is another pun which underlines the seriousness of the girl's death. The rhyming of "truth" and "youth" is also crucial to the poem's developing message, and gives this stanza a quiet, peaceful ending.

The final stanza is slower, thoughtful, and almost elegiac in tone. In spite of the poet's refusal to mourn the girl's death, the final lines of the poem suggest that there is no other adequate response:

Deep with the first dead lies London's daughter,  
Robed in the long friends,  
The grains beyond age, the dark veins of her mother,  
Secret by the unmourning water  
Of the riding Thames.  
After the first death, there is no other.

The alliteration of "Deep", "dead" and "Daughter", coupled with heavy stresses, slow the first line and give an impression of solemnity. The rhyming of "daughter...mother...water...other" add a feeling of reconciliation, order and a strong link between the first and last lines of the stanza. In the final line, however, Thomas extends his belief in the significance of the girl's death, to a belief in the immortality of all life. Her death, then, is a symbol of the unity of all existence, and the futility of war.

The opening of this poem is as strong and unrelating as anything in 18 Poems, but as the poem develops, Thomas's sensitivity to feeling and sound begins to emerge. He refuses to mourn the child's death, preferring to celebrate the natural processes of life instead. In the final stanza, however, he recognizes that death is also a natural process. He captures this paradox in the image of the Thames. The sadness and slowness of the poetry suggest that the Thames does, in fact, mourn for the child. The use of "secret" creates intimacy, and the nasal "m" and "n" sounds in "unmourning water", coupled with long vowels, slow the poetry considerably. The gentle rhythm of "the riding Thames" suggests this same quality of quiet sadness. This kind of emotional delicacy is a quality which we did not find in Thomas's early poetry, but it becomes increasingly significant in his later work.

One of Thomas's best-known poems is "Poem in October"<sup>4</sup> which was inspired by the seascape of Laugharne. Thomas spent much of his adult life in Laugharne and wrote a considerable

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4 Collected Poems p.95.

amount of poetry there. In a broadcast describing his fondness for the town, he focuses on the sounds of the sea:

Off and on, up and down, high and dry, man and boy, I've been living now for fifteen years, or centuries, in this timeless, beautiful, barmy (both spellings) town, in this far, forgetful, important place of herons, cormorants (known here as billy duckers), castle, churchyard, gulls, ghosts, geese, feuds, scares, scandals, cherry-trees, mysteries, jackdaws in the chimneys, bats in the belfry, skeletons in the cupboards, pubs, mud, cockles, flatfish, curlews, rain, and human, often all too human, beings.

"Poem in October" is full of sacramental imagery, suggesting the holiness of this Welsh landscape. Early on the morning of his thirtieth birthday, the poet is walking on the hills above the town and harbour. The opening of the poem resonates with the sounds that he hears. "Poem in October" has a very elaborate sound-structure, and alliteration, rhyme and assonance are used to suggest the meaning of the poem, as much as normal syntax. Let us look carefully at the opening stanza to see how this works:

It was my thirtieth year to heaven  
 Woke to my hearing from harbour and neighbour wood  
     And the mussel pooled and the heron  
         Priested shore  
     The morning beckon  
 With water praying and call of seagull and rook  
 And the knock of sailing boats on the net webbed wall  
     Myself to set foot  
         That second  
     In the still sleeping town and set forth.

The assonance of "year to heaven" in the opening line chimes with "hearing" in the second line, and immediately focuses our attention on sound. The link from "hearing" to "harbour" to "neighbour" is emphasized by the natural stresses in the line. There is a similar link with "heron" and "beckon", with "net webbed", and with "set...second...set" of the stanza's

final lines. We can already see that vowels are extremely important in this poem.

This stanza also demonstrates Thomas's subtle use of rhyme. The progression from "wood" to "rook" to "frost" to "forth" is amplified by carefully linking the endings of the final three lines. "Set foot", "second" and "set forth" all share the "se" syllable, but in each, the emphasis is slightly different. "Set foot" ends with a stop, and suggests lack of motion, but "set forth" ends with a softer fricative, and as the sound carries on, the poet is set in motion. Thomas makes considerable use of half-rhymes and reverse rhymes in this poem, as the effect of full rhymes could be obstructive and cloying.

The seventh line of the stanza creates a clear focus on the sound of sailing boats, knocking against the wall. "Net webbed wall" captures the "knock" of the boats in the stops at the end of "net" and "webbed". The progression from "t" to "bbed" to the liquid "ll" is used to emphasize the way that the sounds of water seem to take over. The assonance of "net webbed" and the alliteration of "webbed wall" facilitate the smoothness of this progression, and the combination of liquids, nasals and semi-vowels create a convincing portrayal of the sound of lapping water.

This intricate structuring of sound continues throughout the poem. In the third stanza, Thomas emphasizes the warm singing of birds:

A springful of larks in a rolling  
 Cloud and the roadside brushes brimming with whistling  
 Blackbirds and the sun of October  
     Summery  
     On the hill's shoulder  
 Here were fond climates and sweet singers suddenly  
 Come in the morning where I wandered and listened  
     To the rain wringing  
     Wind blow cold  
 In the wood faraway under me

This verse is full of warm nasal sounds. There is particular emphasis on the "ing" of "springful", "rolling", "brimming", "whistling", "singers" and "wringing". The natural rhythm of the verse turns "summery", "fond" and "sweet" into long, lush sounds. The reader is given time to really enjoy three adjectives. The association of childhood with innocence and joy, with a kind of natural mysticism is clearly illustrated in this stanza:

These were the woods the river and sea  
     Where a boy  
     In the listening  
 Summertime of the dead whispered the truth of his joy  
 To the trees and the stones and the fish in the tide.  
     And the mystery  
     Sang alive  
     Still in the water and singing birds.

The emphasis is on listening to the small sounds, the "whispered" truth of childhood. The aural link from "listening" to "whispered" to "mystery" suggests the sacramental nature of using one's ears well. The stanza ends with a stress on song, the natural music of water and birds. The use of "still", however, suggests that this song is delicate and very sensitive. It is the song of youth, and Thomas reminds us in the final stanza, that his childhood is "long dead".

The poem ends in a nostalgic mood, but in the final lines, Thomas looks forward to another birthday in a year's time:

And there could I marvel my birthday  
 Away but the weather turned around. And the true  
     Joy of the long dead child sang burning  
         In the sun.  
         It was my thirtieth  
 Year to heaven stood there then in the summer noon  
 Though the town below lay leaved with October blood.  
     O may my heart's truth  
         Still be sung  
 On this high hill in a year's turning.

He sees himself standing in "the summer noon" of life, between childhood and death. Thomas's choice of vowel sounds emphasizes the association of life and death. The juxtaposition of "noon" and "blood" is particularly significant. The nasal warmth of "noon" is completely undercut by the cold, hard sounds of "blood". This image is reinforced by Thomas's use of "October", with its short vowel sounds, and hard consonants.

The ending, however, is restrained and almost prayerful. Thomas returns to the words of the poem's opening line to suggest the cyclic nature of time. This device also gives the poem's ending a sense of peace and harmony, a quality which is further emphasized by the rhyming of "burning" and "turning". The alliteration of "this high hill" requires a considerable amount of breath in the final line, and helps to give the ending a feeling of tiredness. In this poem, Thomas has tried to sing the truth of his birthday, but he knows that he can't go on singing like this forever.

"Poem in October" makes use of a very elaborate sound-structure, as we have seen. Thomas also uses a very strict pattern of syllable counting as a technical framework. In the seven stanzas of the poem, there is only one deviation, in stanza six, line six. There are ten lines in each stanza, and the pattern goes like this:



|                  |   |    |   |   |   |    |    |   |   |    |
|------------------|---|----|---|---|---|----|----|---|---|----|
| <u>line</u>      | 1 | 2  | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6  | 7  | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| <u>syllables</u> | 9 | 12 | 9 | 3 | 5 | 12 | 12 | 5 | 3 | 9  |

This gives some indication of how difficult this poem must have been to write. In spite of this patterning, the poem runs easily off the tongue, and is full of lyricism. The use of odd numbers of syllables tends to break up any regularity of rhythm, and the association of words through sound usually ignores the structure of the poem on the page. Thomas believed that a poem had to sound like a poem, but he also insisted that it looked like a poem. In his later poetry, his sense of construction tends to become more elaborate, while the tone of his poems becomes more gentle and relaxed.

When "Vision and Prayer" was first published in Deaths and Entrances, Thomas's syllabic structuring was fairly obvious. There are twelve stanzas in all, each having seventeen lines. In the first six stanzas, the first line has one syllable, and each succeeding line has an added syllable, until the middle of the stanza is reached, and the process is reversed. In the last six stanzas, the first line has nine syllables, and each succeeding line loses a syllable, until the middle of the stanza is reached, and the process is reversed.

In the original edition, each line of the poem begins at the margin of the page. When Thomas revised the poem for his Collected Poems, however, he decided that this structure should be used to give the poem a concrete shape. The first six stanzas create a diamond, while the last six create the shape of an X on the page. The first half of the poem focuses on the

womb, and the fullness of the diamond illustrates this. The second half of the poem is concerned with death, especially the death of Christ, and once again, the X is visually appropriate.

The poem opens with Thomas exploring the sounds of the womb:

Who  
Are you  
Who is born  
In the next room  
So loud to my own  
That I can hear the womb  
Opening and the dark run  
Over the ghost and the dropped sun  
Behind the wall thin as a wren's bone? 6

Thomas uses the hollow "o" sound in a great variety of ways. There is a simple rhyme in the use of "who...you...who", "room" and "womb", and "own" and "bone". Assonance links the beginnings of lines in "So...Opening...Over" and creates further links with "own...ghost...bone". Alliteration connects "born" with "Behind" and "bone". Open vowel sounds and warm nasal "m"s and "n"s suggest the warm, moist environment of the womb. The final line of the passage quoted above, however, introduces harder consonants, and the image of the "wren's bore" suggests the fragility of the foetus. Thomas expands on this idea in the second half of the stanza.

The poet focuses on the "birth bloody room" where both time and man spoil the delicacy of the womb. The soft sounds of the opening lines give way to a harder realism:

In the birth blood room unknown  
 To the burn and turn of time  
 And the heart print of man  
     Bows no baptism  
     But dark alone  
     Blessing on  
     The wild  
     Child.

In these lines, Thomas emphasizes the plosive "b" sound, and he also uses other hard consonants. Assonance and alliteration are combined to emphasize the progression from "birth" to "burn and turn" to "time". Similarly, assonance is used to link "heart" and "dark". The final rhyme "wild child" emphasizes the hardness of this vision, and the rhyming of "unknown" and "alone" suggests fear and apprehension.

The second stanza continues to focus on the aural perceptions of the foetus. It begins, as the first stanza did, by emphasizing stillness and sensitivity:

I  
     Must lie  
     Still as stone  
     By the wren bone  
     Wall hearing the moan  
     Of the mother hidden  
     And the shadowed head of pain  
     Casting to - morrow like a thorn  
     And the midwives of miracle sing  
     Until the turbulent new born  
     Burns me his name and his flame  
     And the winged wall is torn  
     By his torrid crown  
     And the dark thrown  
     From his loin  
     To bright  
     Light.

The rhyming of "stone", "bone", "moan" and "thrown" provides a strong link with the first stanza. All of this aural

echo suggests that the foetus actually hears and feels these moans. There is further emphasis on rhyme in "thorn", "born" and "torn". In this stanza, however, there is a greater use of alliteration and hard consonant sounds. The "mean" of "mothers", the "midwives of miracle", and "turbulent.. torn...torrid" suggest the uneasy darkness of this vision.

In the final lines of the stanza, the darkness is cast outside. From an aural point of view, "bright light" is completely unexpected. The clipped vowels and hard stops come as a complete surprise, and emphasize the clarity of the "light" image. The strong rhyme reinforces this sense of shock, which is skilfully prepared and presented.

In the second half of "Vision and Prayer", Thomas tends to use more direct forms of repetition. The subject of death, and the tone of prayer combine to create a heavy, formal emphasis on sound:

I turn the corner of prayer and burn  
 In a blessing of the sudden  
 Sun. In the name of the damned  
 I would turn back and run  
 To the hidden land  
 But the loved sun  
 Christens down  
 The sky.  
 I  
 Am found.  
 O let him  
 Scald me and drown  
 Me in his world's wound.  
 His lightning answers my  
 Cry. My voice burns in his hand.  
 Now I am lost in the blinding  
 One. The sun roars at the prayer's end.

The final stanza creates an intense focus on the poetic "I".

The repetition of "I" and "my" and "me" is reinforced by the use of "sky" and "cry". "Damned", "land", "found" and "wound" also contribute to the final "end". The repetition of "burn" and "turn" creates a heavy stress on these verbs. The final lines are an excellent example of synaesthesia. The sun "roars" and the poet's voice "burns", but if Thomas has done his job well, the sun burns, and his voice roars. The end of the poem resonates, and fills the reader's mind with echoes of sound and sense. Through sound, Thomas is able to coax his audience into praying with him, and that is quite an achievement.

The final poem from Deaths and Entrances that I will examine is "When I woke".<sup>7</sup> The opening of the poem focuses on the ideas of speech, sound and music, while the rest of the poem illustrates these ideas:

When I woke, the town spoke.  
Birds and clocks and cross bells  
Dinned aside the coiling crowd,  
The reptile profligates in a flame.

The opening line is immediate and striking. The alliteration of "when I woke", and the rhyme with "spoke" gives the line a convincing finality. This poem uses the pairing of sounds a great deal in individual lines. The alliteration of "b"s and "c"s in the following line is reinforced by the assonance of "clocks and cross". More subtle is Thomas's use of "p", "t" and "l" sounds in the final line quoted above. He seems to be playing with all the possibilities of sound inherent in the word "reptile".

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7 Collected Poems p.126.

This patterning becomes even clearer in the second stanza:

Every morning I make,  
 God in bed, good and bad,  
 After a water-face walk,  
 The death-staggered scatter-breath  
 Mammoth and sparrowfall  
 Everybody's earth.

Alliteration or assonance create a pairing of sound in every line. The final line contains elements of the first line ("Every"), the second line ("bed...bad...body's"), and the fourth line ("death-...- breath...earth"). "Everybody's earth" literally accomodates all of this, so sound and meaning are cleverly woven together.

The final lines of the poem return to the original emphasis on sound and song:

No time, spoke the clocks, no God, rang the bells,  
 I drew the white sheet over the islands  
 And the coins on my eyelids sang like shells.

The first line echoes the poem's opening references to clocks, bells, and the music they make. In the following lines Thomas's use of assonance creates a harmonious ending to the poem. The linking of "I...white...islands...eyelids" also tends to slow the poetry, and the use of softer sounds in the final line suggests sleep. The rhyming of "bells" and "shells" emphasizes the progression towards the soft warmth of sleep. The plosive "b" is replaced by the soft fricative "sh", and the "shells" sing gently in his dreams.

Deaths and Entrances is a volume which clearly illustrates Thomas's ability to manipulate sound. In the poems that I have examined, he uses sound in a great variety of ways. Thomas is at his best, I believe, when he is able to reinforce subtle meanings with equally subtle poetic sounds. In the readings that I am now going to analyse, this acute sensitivity to sound is amplified and dramatized, and the music begins to emerge.

CHAPTER V  
THE VOICE OF THOMAS

When Thomas was alive, he was known as a reader and broadcaster, as well as a writer. As he matured, he became more aware of his poetry as a performing art. His public readings usually included poems by several other poets, but his audiences insisted that he devote most of his time to reading his own work.

We are very fortunate that we have good recordings of Thomas's readings. These recordings illustrate how much Thomas could add to a poem in a public performance. I have already shown how structured Thomas's later poetry tended to be. In a public performance, Thomas was able to amplify the aural vitality of his work, and to use his structures to create patterns and waves of sound. The listener hears the association of sounds and ideas which become music and meaning. In this chapter, I am going to examine the musical qualities of two recordings<sup>1</sup>, which demonstrate, I believe, the "illumination of music".

The two poems I have chosen to analyse are rich in musical ideas. The most striking quality is rhythmic, the patterning achieved through stressing certain syllables in each line. At times, the poetic rhythm is carefully linked to the structure of the poem on the page. Thomas achieves a

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1 New York, Caedmon Recordings, Volume 1, TC 1002.





The vertical lines, or bar-lines, divide the poem into poetic feet. In the recording, Thomas gives particular emphasis to the first accent on "Myself". Although his voice trails off slightly on "the grievors grieve", the repetition of the "grieve" sound counterbalances this. The tension between self and grief is fundamental to the development of the poem. Their juxtaposition and emphasis in the opening lines of the poem set up a problem which the poet must attempt to resolve. Through grief, he is trying to put self aside. The poem moves from "Myself" in the opening line, to the "ultimate kingdom" at the end of the poem. Through powerful gestures of word and sound, Thomas is trying to move beyond himself, and to include the entire created universe.

The strong rhythmic emphasis continues throughout the opening stanza. In the fifth line, the three-beat rhythm gives way to four beats. By way of contrast, this adds further emphasis to the regularity of the opening. Although there is no clear patterning in the rest of the stanza, the stresses remain strong and unrelenting, and the incantation continues to the end of the first section.

Typical of Thomas's use of pitch is his accent on the word "child" in the first stanza. In the fourth line, the pitch of his voice falls, after the strong rhetorical opening. On "child", however, it reaches a new high, and only falls gradually through the remainder of the stanza. The "child" is the central subject of the poem, and Thomas's emphasis of the word underlines this.

The pitch of Thomas's voice is always carefully linked

to the shape of poetic phrases. He tends to pitch his voice higher at the beginning of each phrase, with a gradual falling off which becomes more marked at the end of the phrase. Sometimes Thomas varies this pattern, but any changes are carefully considered and executed. By maintaining a very constant and even pitch for several lines he can create a very sustained emphasis. Any upwards movement of pitch within a phrase gives the sounds involved a special significance.

In this opening stanza, Thomas establishes a pattern of phrasing which acts as a model for the rest of the poem. The stanza is divided into two phrases. The first begins with "myself", and the second with "A child". In both of these phrases, his voice is pitched high and recedes towards the end of the phrase. Not only does the pitch of his voice fall, but the volume and intensity of tone do likewise. This pattern of phrasing closely resembles the idea of a musical phrase which is represented like this:



This poem, then, can be seen as a series of phrases, of tensions, which must be worked through and eventually resolved. This resolution of tension is also at the core of most musical compositions.

The second stanza follows a very similar pattern to the first. The opening lines emphasize the same three-best rhythm:

Begin  
 With singing  
 Sing  
 Darkness kindled back into beginning

The singing quality of the verse is stressed by the rhyme and repetition of "singing" and "beginning". Rhyme and assonance are particularly important in creating echoes of sound in this stanza.

This stanza also consists of two phrases, but the second of these employs two clear stresses. The initial stress is on "a star" which is cleverly linked with "darkness" through assonance:

A stár was bróken  
 Into the centúries of the chıld  
 Myselves griève now, and mîracles cánot atóne.

The second special stress is on the "child". Thomas underlines the importance of this word, once again. Childhood is the essential theme of this poem, and Thomas is not going to let his audience forget it.

The poet also uses a vital rhythmic and musical motif for the first time in the poem. "Into the" and "over the" are crucial to the build-up of tension in the final section of the poem. This motif also makes use of the strong triple rhythm which is further emphasized by a slight, yet distinct, rise in pitch. The incessant repetition of this motif in the final section gives it far more power, but here, it is an important warning of things to come.

As the end of this phrase approaches, the pitch of Thomas's voice begins to fall away. He insists, however, on making sure that the negative assertion at the end of the stanza is not lost. Thomas uses his voice to create an unexpected cadence. On "cannot", the pitch

of his voice rises, and he is able to emphasize the negative, without having to distort the poem's rhythm. Thomas uses the same device on "atone". There is greater weight on the first syllable, but the rising pitch of the word is contrary to what we expect at the end of a phrase. This little surprise forces the listener to think carefully about the sounds that he hears. According to my calculations, Thomas's voice rises by a musical tone on the word "atone", but I doubt if Thomas knew he was being that clever!

The opening of the third stanza introduces an element of syncopation into the three-beat rhythm. The first real stress is withheld until the second line; whereas we expect a stress on give:

Forgive  
 Us forgive  
 Us your death that mysélves the beliévers...

The emphasis is now on "us" rather than self. By increasing the pace and the volume, Thomas seems to involve his audience in the growing awareness of tension. The pitch of his voice rises to create a powerful focus on the second "us". The juxtaposition of "us" and "myselfes" in the third line, is a clear dramatic statement of the tension between the public and the private self.

There is further reinforcement of "us" in the overall structure and phrasing of the stanza. Thomas treats this stanza as one long phrase, his voice gradually falling away from the climactic opening. At the end of the stanza, a simple four-beat rhythm is used and repeated, as his voice softens and continues to descend in pitch. Thomas also slows down to create a strong feeling of solemnity, as he considers


the inevitability of death:

 3  
As the grains blow, as your death grows, through our heart.

This rhythmic pattern is reinforced by the assonance of "blow" and "grows". Assonance is also used to link "us" and "dust", and Thomas adds a slight stress to "dust" to make sure that his audience doesn't miss the connection.








The tone of the poem has now become subdued and gentle, and in the next stanza, the pace becomes slightly slower. The accents are less marked, the dynamics are softer, and the three-beat rhythm is used four times to give the stanza a feeling of regularity and harmony. This rhythm has now become a part of the poem's musical background, and it simply keeps the verse flowing on.

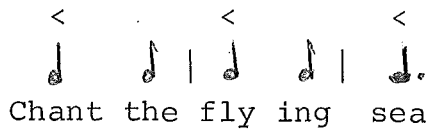
The opening lines closely resemble those of the second stanza. Repetition of sounds suggests harmony, and the gentle rhythm reinforces this:

 4  
Cry ing your dy ing cry Child...

Once again, Thomas raises the pitch of his voice to emphasize the significance of the word "child". In this stanza, it is reinforced by alliteration with "chant" which becomes the beginning of another statement of the three-beat rhythm:

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3  =  and  =  =   
4  = 



"Chant" is homophonically associated with "chart", but Thomas uses the word to stress the feeling of incantation which has flowed throughout the opening section of the poem.

The first section ends with a preponderance of liquid "l" sounds. "L<sup>o</sup>ve is the l<sup>a</sup>st light sp<sup>o</sup>ken" and "L<sup>o</sup>in of the bl<sup>a</sup>ck husk l<sup>e</sup>ft" both make use of the three-beat rhythm. As Thomas's voice recedes, the sounds seem to melt into darkness and silence. The persistent beat of the opening section gives way to more relaxed and meditative poetry, as if Thomas had set the next section in a different musical key.

The second section is considerably quieter and more gentle. Thomas still stresses certain syllables, but the stress is like that of natural speech. The poetry flows through long phrases in a gentle, lilting rhythm. Thomas makes use of the lower register of his voice, and his delivery is much flatter and more even. The tone is sad and serious, as the poet meditates on death.

Sound and meaning work especially well together in parts of this section:

O Adam and Eve together  
 Lying in the lull  
 Under the sad breast of the headstone  
 White as the skeleton to  
 Of the garden of Eden.

This is certainly a lull after the chant-like opening, and before the final rhetorical climax. The crisp consonants in "white as the skeleton" are emphasized by whispering. The coldness of the image is fully exploited by his delivery

of the line.

At the end of the second stanza, Thomas goes a step further:

Bare as the nurseries  
Of the garden of wilderness.

These lines use exactly the same syllabic pattern as the end of the first stanza. As Thomas's voice dwindles, however, Eden becomes a "wilderness", and he evokes the darkness and despair of that image, in the depths of his voice.

The final section of "Ceremony After a Fire Raid" is powerful and apocalyptic. Thomas creates a long, sustained climax, using all the strength of his voice, and all the skills of a poetic craftsman. The most obvious of these is his use of simple repetition. In this section, the "Into the..." motif is used to create a compulsive driving rhythm.

The first lines focus, once again, on the aural nature of experience.

Into the organpipes and steeples  
Of the luminous cathedrals

These lines see a return to the strong beat of the poem's opening. Thomas's voice returns to a moderate pitch and volume, but there is also a tone of urgency, now. His voice rises in pitch into the stress on "organpipes". Thomas uses the "Into the..." motif rather like a swell pedal on an organ. The volume and intensity of his voice increases, and a slight growling at the bottom of his throat creates a grinding tone,



which becomes more marked as the motif is repeated. On each repetition, the pitch of Thomas's voice steps up a notch. The sense of urgency is increased through volume, intensity of stress and rhythm. It is not until the end of the poem that all of this growing tension is finally resolved. Suspense is created by withholding the crucial verbs of the stanza, so that the final lines of the poem are needed to resolve both sound and meaning.

The structure of this section is also crucial in creating suspense. Two two-line phrases are followed by a five-line phrase. This five-line phrase, however, breaks down into small segments:

Into the dead clock burning the hour  
 Over the urn of sabbaths  
 Over the whirling ditch of daybreak  
 Over the sun's hovel and the slum of fire  
 And the golden pavements laid in requiem

"Over the..." is another motif used to add to the sense of rhythmic urgency. Its repetition, line after line, creates an accelerated rhythmic drive.

At this point, Thomas's voice is powerful and full of imminent climax. The phrases and patterns in the poem now become even shorter. After two one-line phrases, Thomas finally presents the central noun and main idea of the stanza. We aren't, however, given the verbs which accompany them, until this main idea has been repeated three times:

Into the bréad in a wheatfield of flames,  
 Into the wine burning like brandy,  
 The mās<sup>s</sup>es of the sea  
 The mās<sup>s</sup>es of the sea under

The masses of the infant-bearing sea  
 Erupt, fountain, and enter to utter for ever  
 Glory. Glory. glory  
 The sundering ultimate kingdom of genesis' thunder.

The patterning of threes is very important in these lines. The repeated segments become shorter and shorter and Thomas is virtually shouting, now. He creates further suspense by withholding the verbs for three lines, through the ceremonial repetition of "the masses".

When Thomas finally delivers these verbs, the pace slows to create even further emphasis. He introduces a slight tremor in his voice which suggests that this build-up of power is beyond control. The "gl" consonants in "glory" are almost separated, and the final line is slower, heavier and even more marked. His voice literally thunders through these lines, and the quivering of his voice suggests the thrill of both fear and exultation. Assonance and rhyme are used by Thomas to create an absolutely convincing ending to the poem. "Erupt" and "utter" are linked to the "sundering", "ultimate" and "thunder" of the final line. The rhyming of "thunder" and "under" is further reinforced by the ending of the line which comes between. "Enter to utter for ever" creates a powerful emphasis on the final rhyme.

Thomas has worked extremely hard, in this poem, to create an unforgettable climax of feeling and sound. In his reading of "Ceremony After a Fire Raid", he has shown how convincing that climax can be. At the end of the poem the sound of his voice echoes on and on in "glory".

"Fern Hill"<sup>5</sup> is a complete contrast in mood and style. This poem is a gentle evocation of a farm which Thomas remembered fondly from his childhood. The poet associates Ann Jones' farm with happiness and freedom, and the lilting rhythms of the poem attempt to match this childhood sense of wonder. The senses are intoxicated with all that there is to feel and see, but typically, Thomas emphasizes the sounds of his experiences. The calves "sang", the foxes "barked", the sabbath "rang", and the poet hears "tunes" from the chimney. Thomas's reading of "Fern Hill" attempts to capture a sense of aural freshness and discovery. It is a tuneful poem because it focuses on the significance of small sounds, and their relationship in words. The lyrical, lilting mood creates a gentle, harmonious atmosphere, and the music flows easily off the page.

"Fern Hill" is another example of a highly structured poem. It consists of six stanzas of nine lines, and each line has an almost identical number of syllables. The table below indicates the number of syllables in each line, and illustrates the strict pattern which Thomas maintained.

|      | Stanza  | 1  | 2  | 3  | 4  | 5  | 6  |
|------|---------|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Line | 1 ..... | 14 | 14 | 14 | 14 | 14 | 14 |
|      | 2 ..... | 14 | 14 | 14 | 14 | 14 | 14 |
|      | 3 ..... | 9  | 9  | 9  | 9  | 9  | 9  |
|      | 4 ..... | 6  | 6  | 6  | 6  | 6  | 6  |
|      | 5 ..... | 9  | 9  | 9  | 9  | 9  | 9  |
|      | 6 ..... | 15 | 14 | 14 | 14 | 14 | 14 |
|      | 7 ..... | 14 | 14 | 15 | 14 | 14 | 15 |
|      | 8 ..... | 7  | 7  | 9  | 9  | 9  | 7  |
|      | 9 ..... | 9  | 9  | 6  | 6  | 6  | 9  |

The slight alterations in the last four lines are quite insignificant when considering the overall pattern. In spite of this structural strait jacket, the poem seems to flow with freedom and ease. Thomas does not allow this elaborate structure to interfere with either the meaning of the poem, or the music of its language.

The first two stanzas of "Fern Hill" have a lot in common. While the first focuses on visual aspects of the child's experience, the second focuses on the sounds of the farm:

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs  
 About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,  
     The night above the dingle starry,  
     Time let me hail and climb  
     Golden in the heydays of his eyes,  
 And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns  
 And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves  
     Trail with daisies and barley  
     Down the rivers of the windfall light.

And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns  
 About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home,  
     In the sun that is young once only,  
     Time let me play and be  
     Golden in the mercy of his means,  
 And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves  
 Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold,  
     And the sabbath rang slowly  
 In the pebbles of the holy streams.

The repeated patterns in these stanzas are very obvious, yet the long lines, and lilting rhythm, tend to bring out the association between individual words and sounds, rather than the larger patterns. Certain words and sounds are emphasized by simple repetition. "Green", "golden" and "time" are significant examples of this. Assonance is also a very important linking device in these stanzas. "Easy", "green", "trees", "leaves", "free", "be", "means" and "streams" all make use of the long "e" vowel. "I", "might", "time", "climb" "eyes" and "light" are similarly connected. The

emphasis on long vowel sounds, and the repeated use of assonance create a prevailing sense of harmony in the poem.

The poem's opening phrase begins with a simple motif which works rather like the "into the..." idea in "Ceremony After a Fire Raid". "Now as I was..." becomes "And as I was..." in the second stanza. In the poem's final stanza, this motif becomes "Oh as I was..." and is used to introduce the recapitulation of sounds and themes. In this motif, Thomas's voice rises in pitch, and increases in volume, before arriving on the key words of the phrase. In the first stanza, the emphasis is on "young and easy", and Thomas's voice falls away through the rest of the phrase. In the second stanza the same thing happens with the stress on "green and carefree".

The first phrase falls away sharply at the end of the third line, and the second phrase begins with a strong accent on "Time". Time is a key word and idea in the poem, and this accent in the first stanza gives it clear aural significance. At the beginning of the next line, there is a secondary stress on "golden", another key word in the poem. Thomas almost sings these words. His gentle pace allows him to savour the lush vowel sounds, and he conveys a sense of delight in the sounds of these words.

At the end of the opening stanza, Thomas's voice emphasizes the patterning of vowel sounds. "Trail" and "daisies" are carefully linked, and "barley" introduces a more closed vowel sound. In the final line, this pattern is matched by the progression from "rivers" to "windfall" to

"light". The predominance of warm nasal sounds, and liquid "l"s, gives the end of the stanza a quality of gentle warmth.

As the second stanza proceeds, the poetry becomes less regular and more complex. Stresses on "sang", "rang" and "barked" emphasize the aural aspects of perception. In this stanza, Thomas uses his voice to underline the meaning of certain words. On "clear and cold" his voice shudders slightly. His pace slows on "the sabbath rang slowly". This also emphasizes the association between "slowly" and "holy". In the final line, the progression from "pebbles" to "holy" to "streams" is from short to long vowel sounds. The slow delivery, and the homophonic association with "dreams", creates a nostalgic almost sleepy mood. It is this mood which Thomas explores in the next two stanzas.

The third stanza begins more quietly, and Thomas's voice becomes a gentle treble. "Fern Hill" is always lilting, but now the natural accents of speech are down-played. By the middle of the stanza, his voice begins to quiver, especially in such phrases as "green as grass" where the "gr" sound almost becomes two separate consonants. This quivering has a completely contrasting effect to the shaking of his voice at the end of "Ceremony After a Fire Raid". Here it suggests tenderness and delicacy. Thomas's gentle tremolo on words like "air" gives them a special, ethereal quality. The verbs in this stanza tend to be emphasized by this shaking of the voice. Thomas illustrates this in "I rode to sleep" where his voice quivers on the verb, but becomes smooth on "sleep".

Towards the end of the stanza, Thomas's voice is like an emphatic whisper. This tends to create a strong focus on fricative sounds:

All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the  
                                   nightjars  
 Flying with the ricks, and the horses  
                   Flashing into the dark.

Thomas draws his audience's attention to the child's ability to remember sounds. The first strong memory is "the nightjars flying", and he gives the verb a dynamic stress. Thomas creates further emphasis by separating the "f" and "l" sounds of "flying", and he uses this again with "flashing". The "s", "f" and "sh" sounds of "horses flashing" are fully exploited by Thomas's dramatic whispering. His strong emphasis on the "sh" of "flashing", and the hollow sound of "dark" which follows, give the end of the stanza a mysterious quality.

The next stanza opens with dawn, a new day on the farm, and Thomas's voice begins with fresh energy. The strong, regular rhythm of the opening line suggests new life and joy:

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And then to a - wake and the farm like a wanderer white

The emphasis on the word "farm", in the middle of the line, creates a symmetrical rise and fall, which is matched by the pitch of Thomas's voice. The next strong accent falls on "shining", which underlines the brightness that Thomas discovers in the sun of a new day. The horses are "walking





feeling of carefree timelessness. The repetition of "Nothing I cared" emphasizes the poets wish to retain a state of childhood innocence. As the sentence progresses, however, it becomes increasingly difficult to deny adult responsibility. Thomas emphasizes "Nor that riding to steep" which refers back to "I rode to sleep" in the third stanza. His voice quivers, and the stress on "riding" is now tainted with fear. Thomas is afraid that he will wake "to the farm forever fled". The simple alliteration is enough to underline the reality of that fear, and Thomas's voice fades into deep, but quiet resonance.

In the final lines of the poem, Thomas's voice becomes older and more mature, as the adult world becomes inescapable. The poet is suspended in time, between the past and the future:

Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,  
                     Time held me green and dying  
 Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

This final phrase is filled with associations of youth and age. In the first line, Thomas leans on "was" to suggest that his childhood is now in the past. The shaking of his voice in this line suggests the uncertainty of being subject to time. In the following line, this uncertainty is illustrated in the tension between "green" and "dying". "Green", however, has become rather a commonplace in the poem, and the linking of "Time" and "dying" through assonance, suggests the inevitability of death. Thomas's delivery of this line emphasizes the importance of "dying". He maintains a strong high pitch on "Time", "green" and "dying", but at the end of a line like this, we expect the

pitch of his voice to drop. It doesn't and "dying" is further emphasized by the isolation of the sound at the end of the line.

In the final line, the pitch of Thomas's voice falls slightly. He accents "song", "chains" and "sea" with a very thin, singing tone, and the relentlessness of his voice suggests that he is straining in his "chains". The adult world makes inevitable demands on us all, and Thomas cannot escape from them. He can only go on singing in wave after wave of sound.

Thomas's voice was certainly a fine musical instrument. In a public reading, he knew how to exploit it so that the meanings and tensions of his poems became dramatic, real and alive. Thomas amplified and underlined the importance of music in his poems <sup>and</sup> /in so doing, he turned the public poetry reading into an extremely subtle and sensitive art form:

It was through the act of public reading, whether by radio or before a visible audience, that Thomas attained the phenomenal success which he achieved during his short lifetime... 6

And it was through the act of public reading that Thomas decided to attempt to write a play. The result represents another step for Thomas as a craftsman in sound. Under Milk Wood is a fine example of his ability to use music as an aid to the illumination of language.

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6 MAUD, R.N. and DAVIES, A.T. The Colour of Saying  
London, J.H. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1963.p.xviii.

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## CHAPTER VI

### UNDER MILK WOOD

In this chapter, I am going to examine Under Milk Wood in the light of what we have already seen about the relationship between Thomas's poetry and music. In his "Second Preface" to the play, Daniel Jones says that Under Milk Wood is "surely his most widely known composition". It has been filmed, staged, read both publicly and privately, and translated into many languages.

The full title of Thomas's play is Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices. This is a play which is meant to be heard. The medium is somewhere between a play and a poem, and it makes use of characteristics shared by both:

The play, whether heard in the mind or from a stage, is meant for the ear, which, unlike the eye, imposes no limits upon the imagination. <sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, I am going to analyse the role of music in this particularly aural medium.

Music exists on several levels in Under Milk Wood. In the songs and interludes, it acts as a thread to provide a link between the many characters of Llarregub. Music also exists in the poetry of the language, where it creates waves of tension and harmony between words. There is music, too, in the voices of Thomas's characters. He uses three narrators in the play, to create an every-changing perspective

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<sup>1</sup> Jones, Daniel. Second Preface in Under Milk Wood London, Everyman Paperback, 1977. p.xii.

of sound and meaning. Each of the other characters is defined and detailed in bold, aural terms.

The first direction in Under Milk Wood is for silence. In a medium where sound is so important, silence is the background against which all else is measured. It can be seen as a backdrop for the play. The play begins with a long monologue from the first of the narrators. First Voice has the largest part in Under Milk Wood, and he is frequently used to set the scene. In his opening speech, he portrays the small town of Llarregub in terms of small, subtle sounds.

Thomas instructs his narrator to begin "very softly". It is a quiet, moonless night in Llarregub. The opening line comes right out of the void, the emptiness of Genesis' opening chapter:

To begin at the beginning:  
It is spring, moonless night in the small town, starless  
and bible-black, the cobblestreets silent and the hunched,  
courters'-and-rabbits' wood limping invisible down to  
the sloeblack, slow, black, crowblack, fishing-boat-  
bobbing sea. <sup>2</sup>

These lines create an immediate focus on the sounds of the language because there is nothing to see except blackness. The night is "moonless", "starless", "bible-black" and "invisible", the patterned repetition of "sloeblack, slow, black, crowblack" gives this strong emphasis. There is nothing to hear in the streets and the sounds of courters and rabbits in the wood are barely audible. Even the gentle lapping of the sea is a tiny sound. The deliberate repetition of

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2 Under Milk Wood p.1.

plosive "b" sounds in "boat-bobbing" suggests the bubbling of water.

In the next few lines, Thomas continues to emphasize the importance of sound in Under Milk Wood:

The houses are blind as moles (though moles see fine tonight in the snouting, velvet dingles) or blind as Captain Cat there in the muffled middle by the pump and the town clock, the shops in mourning, the Welfare Hall in widows' weeds. And all the people of the lulled and dumbfound town are sleeping now.<sup>3</sup>

Captain Cat's blindness intensifies his ability to hear the sounds of the town. As the play develops, Captain Cat becomes more important in providing a shrewd perspective on events in Llarregub. He is able to interpret and to use sounds in very clever ways, and for this reason Thomas, puts him in the middle of the town.

Tonight, however, the town is "muffled", "lulled" and "dumbfound". Thomas's use of assonance and alliteration reinforces the connection between these adjectives. He tells his audience that they will need to listen intently to hear the sounds of the sleeping town. The next word in the text is "hush". Thomas draws his audience closer, insisting that they hear and feel the tiny images of sound which set the scene.

The opening speech is full of imperatives to "listen". Thomas treats his audience as a select group of people who have been invited to experience a unique artistic event:

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3 Under Milk Wood p.1.

You can hear the dew falling, and the hushed town breathing. Only your eyes are unclosed to see the black and folded town fast, and slow, asleep. And you alone can hear the invisible starfall, the darkest-before-dawn minutely dewgrazed stir of the black, dab-filled sea...<sup>4</sup>

Thomas intensifies the atmosphere of tiny sounds by addressing his audience on a personal level. He tries to get even closer with carefully controlled imperatives:

Time passes. Listen. Time passes.  
Come closer now.  
Only you can hear...<sup>5</sup>

Repetition of "only you" is used to make the audience feel that the narrator is addressing them as individuals. Once he has established their trust, Thomas takes his audience to the private world of dreams. "Only you can hear and see, behind the eyes of the sleepers". His choice of language emphasizes the fragility of dreams. Tiny images are mixed with exotic fantasies of "tunes and wishes", "and despairs and big seas". At the end of this speech, Thomas reminds us that we must listen very carefully and he promises that we will hear their dreams.

Thomas introduces Captain Cat, the "retired blind sea-captain" who dreams of the sea, where he sinks into contact with five drowned sailors. The transition from Captain Cat's bunk, where he is sleeping, to the sea, where he is dreaming, is emphasized by the introduction of Second Voice, the second narrator. The First Voice ends his speech with "Captain Cat..dreams of" and the Second Voice tells us exactly what Captain Cat is dreaming about:

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4 Under Milk Wood p.2. (The italics are Thomas's)

5 Ibid, p.2-3.

...never such seas as any that swamped the decks of his S.S. Kidwelly bellying over the bedclothes and jelly-fish-slippery sucking him down salt deep into the Davy dark where the fish come biting out and nibble him down to his wishbone, and the long drowned muzzle up to him. 6

On the boat's decks, the profusion of "s" sounds suggests the surf breaking and hissing around the boat. "Jellyfish-slippery sucking" slides off the tongue and cleverly suggests the idea of sinking into the sea. The predominance of "d" sounds in "down salt deep into the Davy dark" creates a strong emphasis on hollow, plosive sounds suggesting the bubbling of the sea. The emphasis then charges to nasal "m", "n" and "ng" sounds which create a muffled, distant effect. The progression from Captain Cat's bunk, to the depths of the sea, is carefully illustrated by Thomas's use of sound, and the use of long vowels in "long drowned" seems to create an ethereal quality for the introduction of the voices which follow.

Captain Cat, Rosie Probert and the five drowned now conduct a very fragmented conversation. The rapid shift from voice to voice creates an ever-changing pattern of sound. There is little, if any, rational connection between the various fragments of the dream, but Thomas does create some links by repeating words and sounds. It is only when First Drowned asks "How's it above?" that the response becomes ordered and patterned. Each sailor takes it in turn to ask about an especially fond memory:

Second drowned: Is there rum and laverbread?  
 Third drowned: Bosoms and robins?  
 Fourth drowned: Concertinas?  
 Fifth drowned: Ebenezer's bell?  
 First drowned: Fighting and onions? 7

The flurry of questions builds into a relentless repeated rhythm. Each question has two strong beats, and the constant repetition of this rhythm creates tension, like the rapid beating of a drum. Captain Cat is completely exhausted by the demands of the drowned, and he can only respond in sympathy. "Oh, my dead dears!" Thomas makes considerable use of rhythmic devices like this to create and diffuse tension in Under Milk Wood.

Thomas now moves to the dream of Miss Price, a dress-maker and sweetshop-keeper. First Voice returns to introduce the new character, and to remind the audience of their responsibility to listen:

From where you are you can hear in Cockle Row  
 in spring, moonless night, Miss Price...<sup>8</sup>

and the Second Voice takes over to evoke the subject of her dream, her lover, Mog Edwards. Mr. Edwards a draper, a businessman, and Thomas portrays <sup>him</sup> as a figure of materialistic lust:

I have come to take you away to my Emporium  
 on the hill, where the change <sup>hums</sup> on wires...I  
 will warm the sheets like an electric toaster, <sup>9</sup>  
 I will lie by your side like the Sunday roast.

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7 Under Milk Wood p.4-5.

8 Ibid, p.6.

9 Ibid,p.6.



Thomas's use of warm nasal sounds emphasizes the warmth that they crave in their relationship, but the absurdity of the imagery suggests that what they have to offer each other is completely inappropriate. Thomas takes their relationship to its inevitable conclusion when Mr. Edwards proposes, and Miss Price responds with "Yes, Mog, yes, Mog, yes, yes, yes." The strong rhythm and repetition of the line suggests a taunting, childish chant, Mr. Edwards responds as romantically as he is able:

And all the bells of the tills of the town shall  
ring for our wedding.

(Noise of money-tills and chapel bells) <sup>10</sup>

The physical noise of "tills" and "bells" caps the comedy and the absurdity of the relationship.

First Voice now takes us back into the darkness of the night where we meet Jack Black, the cobbler. The narrator draws the audience close to him:

Come now, drift up the dark, come up the drifting  
sea-dark street now in the dark night seesawing like  
the sea, to the bible-black airless attic over Jack Black  
the cobbler's shop where alone and savagely Jack  
Black sleeps in a nightshirt tied to his ankles with  
elastic and dreams of <sup>11</sup>

Repetition of "dark", "sea" and "black" create a stark atmosphere. Thomas's use of "alone and savagely" is taken further in the piece that follows. Jack Black, in fact, has nightmares of "chasing", "flogging" and "driving out

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10 Under Milk Wood p.7.

11 Ibid, p.7.

the bare bold girls". These strong, active verbs emphasize the terror of Jack's vision of hell. His puritanical fear has him imprisoned in the "nightshirt tied to his ankles". Jack's response is to scream out in agony and disgust. "Ach y fi!" is a Welsh expression of horror and anguish, and this guttural cry emphasizes the pain of his suffering.

From Jack Black, Thomas moves to Evans the Death, the undertaker, who has no fear, but "laughs high and aloud in his sleep". Thomas compared Evans to an excited, over-indulgent child. His nursery-rhyme prose emphasizes the happy, uncaring nature of the undertaker who makes it his business to "steal" bodies for burial. Evans sees the grave as a warm bed, and he obviously enjoys his job and his dreams.

From Evans, we move to Waldo, all "seventeen snoring gentle stone" of him. Waldo's dream begins with a simple nursery rhyme, "This little pig went to market", but the strong rhythmic emphasis of the rhyme is used to introduce a long piece of rhythmic dialogue. There is a considerable amount of simple repetition in this section. Waldo's wife, a phrenetic woman, is always screaming "Waldo! Waldo!" Her primary concern is "Oh, what'll the neighbours say, what'll the neighbours..." Thomas introduces four neighbours and we hear exactly what they say.

Mrs. Waldo's neighbours are used to create a strong rhythmic pattern. Each fragment of dialogue has two strong beats, and the cumulative effect of this kind of writing

is like the driving rhythm of a train:

First neighbour: Póor Mrs. Wáldo  
 Second neighbour: Whát she puts úp with  
     First: Néver should of married  
     Second: If she didn't hád to  
     First: Sáme as her móther  
     Second: Thére's a husband fór you 12

As the pace of the dialogue increases, the tension grows. There is some release when Waldo's wife breaks in on the exchange and tearfully exclaims, "Oh, Waldo, Waldo!" But the first two neighbours are joined by two more, and the rhythmic onslaught continues.

This exchange reaches a climax when Thomas alters the original rhythmic pattern, and has the four neighbours chanting together:

Fourth neighbour: Gíve him sénnapods and lóck him in  
                                     the dárk.  
 Third neighbour: Óff to the refórmatory  
 Fourth neighbour: Óff to the refórmatory  
 Together: Léarn him with a slípper on his b.é.m. 13

The simple use of repetition, follows by the chorusing of voices, creates a shrill climax. The harshness of the chanting carefully portrays the vindictiveness of the neighbours. They band together to mete out justice for Waldo.

Thomas presents a completely different kind of music when he introduces Organ Morgan. In a note on pronunciation Thomas insists that this name is pronounced with rolled "r"s and short "o"s. The sound of his name, then, suggests a luxurious enjoyment of warm, nasal "r" sounds. Organ

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12 Under Milk Wood p.4.

13 Ibid, p.12.

Morgan dreams of:

.... perturbation and music in Coronation Street!  
 All the spouses are honking like geese and the babies  
 singing opera. P.C. Attila Rees has got his truncheon  
 out and is playing cadenzas by the pump, the  
 cows from Sunday Meadow ring like reindeer, and on  
 the roof of Handel Villa see the Women's Welfare  
 hoofing, bloomed, in the moon. <sup>14</sup>

Organ Morgan doesn't need to open his eyes to become aware  
 of all the music around him. Perturbation and music go  
 hand in hand in Llarregub. The babies and cows make the  
 finest music, while the spouses honk like geese, and the  
 Women's Welfare imitate cows. The heavy use of assonance  
 in "roof", "hoofing", "bloomed" and "moon" suggests the  
 mooing of cows. P.C. Rees plays cadenzas on his truncheon,  
 and Thomas suggests that there may be a sexual motive  
 behind all this music and sound.

The dream sequence ends with Lord Cut-glass,  
 whose world depends upon the passing of time. He dreams of  
 "tick tock tick tock tick tock tick tock" and First Voice  
 returns to remind the audience of the natural time of dawn  
 and birds:

Time passes. Listen. Time passes. An owl flies home  
 past Bethesda, to a chapel in an oak. And the dawn  
 inches up.

(One distant bell-note, faintly reverberating) <sup>15</sup>

We hear the music of the clock, and the distant sound of  
 the bell. We see the nocturnal owl fly home to rest. We  
 hear the rubbing of the owl's wings in the fricative sounds

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<sup>14</sup> Under Milk Wood p.15.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.21

of "inches" and "chapel". As dawn approaches, the sounds of Llarregub begin to grow and accumulate.

In the following paragraph, Thomas enlarges on this:

You can hear the love-sick woodpigeons mooning in bed.  
A dog barks in his sleep, farmyards away. The  
town ripples like a lake in the waking haze. 16

The cooing of pigeons is cleverly captured in Thomas's use of "mooning". The warm nasal "m" and "n" sounds suggest the warmth of their beds. Thomas's use of "farmyards" is an interesting soundscape of the distant barking of a dog. When the vowels are slightly shortened, "farmyards" becomes "ar-ar", and the dog is clearly heard. Thomas's use of assonance in "lake", "waking" and "haze" creates a feeling of harmony, as the natural sounds seem to "ripple" across the town.

When the cock crows, First Voice announces the arrival of a fine spring morning:

The principality of the sky lightens now, over our green  
hill, into spring morning larked and crowed and belling. 17

The use of nouns as adjectives creates an element of surprise in the language. The familiar harbingers of morning are given a quality of freshness by Thomas. This original use of language is underlined by comparison with the piece that follows. The Reverend Eli Jenkins delivers his morning poem to the street, as we would expect him to

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16 Under Milk Wood p.21.

17 Ibid, p.22.

deliver a sermon. His use of inflated language and very predictable sentiments adds nothing to the plod and forced rhyme of his verse.

Eli Jenkins' poem is a bold public gesture, but it is full of cliché and bathos:

Dear Gwalia! I know there are  
 Towns lovelier than ours,  
 And fairer hills and loftier far,  
 And graves more full of flowers,  
  
 And boskier woods more blithe with spring  
 And bright with birds' adorning,  
 And sweeter bards than I to sing  
 Their praise this beauteous morning. 18

The unfortunate association of "Gwalia" with "graves" and "birds" with "bards" underlines the problem that he has in trying to put poems together. He knows how to write rhymes and rhythms, but he doesn't have any experiences to write about.

Thomas creates a splendid contrast when he introduces Lily Smalls, Mrs. Beynon's maid. Her poem is a very private work of art. She admires herself in Mr. Beynon's shaving-glass and responds with natural warmth:

Oh there's a face!  
 Where you get that hair from?  
 Got it from a old tom cat.  
 Give it back then, love.  
 Oh there's a perm! 19

The language, the grammar, and the manner are completely natural. Lily's wit is carefully controlled by Thomas. The pun on "perm", for instance, is clever, but underplayed

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18 Under Milk Wood p.23.

19 Ibid,p.25.

by Lily.

Although she is looking into a mirror, Thomas portrays Lily as a very humble person. Her self-mocking is a harmless game, and she conveys a great deal of happiness in her teasing manner. The final verse of her poem is carefully modulated to create a moment of great tenderness:

Lily:       Who is it loves you?  
               Shan't tell.  
               Come on, Lily.  
               Cross your heart then?  
               Cross my heart.

First Voice: And very softly, her lips almost touching  
                   her reflection, she breathes the name and  
                   clouds the shaving-glass. 20

Thomas creates an extraordinary amount of suspense in these lines. We hear the name coming, we see it, and we feel it, but then it is gone. Lily presents a sensitive and moving self-portrait. She is the antithesis of Eli Jenkins, and Thomas fully exploits the contrast between them.

As the morning progresses in Llarregub, Captain Cat begins to take a more active part in the play. Thomas uses the blind Captain to stress the importance of sound in the town:

... sitting at the window of Schooner House, blind  
       Captain Cat hears all the morning of the town.  
       { School bell in background. Children's voices.  
               The noise  
       of children's feet on the cobbles 21

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20 Under Milk Wood p.25.

21 Ibid, p.35.

Captain Cat is able to identify and describe the morning's events through what he hears. Thomas chooses words which carefully imitate the sounds that Captain Cat hears, and he continues to underline the importance of sound in the play. While Organ Morgan plays his organ in the background, Captain Cat listens and observes:

Somebody's coming. Now the voices round the pump,  
can see somebody coming. Hush, there's a hush!  
You can tell by the noise of the hush, it's Polly  
Garter. 22

The voices round the pump have grown eyes. Captain Cat can identify Polly Garter from the way the other women respond. The triple repetition of "hush" emphasizes the importance of small sounds, and the sensitivity of his ears.

Captain Cat goes on to comment, in an undertone, on Polly Garter's reputation. His language captures the sounds of Polly's life, as well as the response of the other women of Llarregub:

Hullo, Polly my love, can you hear the dumb goose-hiss  
of the wives as they hullo and peck or flounce  
at a waddle away? Who cuddled you when?  
Which of the gardening hubbies moaned in Milk  
Wood for your naughty gandering arms and body  
like a wardrobe, love? 23

The image of geese is fully exploited by Thomas. "Huddle", "peck", "flounce" and "waddle" all capture the ungainly squabbling of these women. Thomas suggests the open expansiveness of Polly by using progressions from short to

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22 Under Milk Wood p. 40.

23 Ibid, p.40.



long vowels. "Gardening hubbies moaned", and "Naughty mothering arms" also suggest the importance of Polly's sexual role in the small town. The predominance of warm nasal "m" and "n" sounds suggests that Polly really enjoys her role. The warmth of Captain Cat's reaction is a deliberate contrast with the coldness of the hissing wives. When he asks, "Who cuddled you when?" the Captain is suggesting that Polly may have been deprived of affection as a child. At least he is sympathetic.

As the organ music fades into silence, the streets of Llarregub begin to hum with daily business. First Voice is used, once again, to demonstrate the importance of sound in the small town:

There's the clip clop of horses on the sunhoneyed cobbles of the humming streets, hammering of horse-shoes, gobble quack and cackle, tomtit twitter from the bird-ounced boughs, braying on Donkey Down. Bread is baking, pigs are grunting, chop goes the butcher, milk-churns bell, tills ring, sheep cough, dogs shout, saws sing. 24

Much of the music in this passage is very obvious. Thomas does, however, mix predictable and unusual sounds. "Sunhoneyed cobbles", for instance, with its internal rhyme and warm "n" sounds, creates a convincing feeling of harmony and warmth. The link with "humming" sheds new light and sound on a rather common adjective, and the "hammering of horse-shoes" gains a great deal from the alliteration.

Thomas's treatment of birds follows similar lines.

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"Gobble quack and cackle" are real enough, but very predictable. The "bird-ounced boughs", however, suggest light-weightedness through both syntax and sound. The homophonic association with "bounced" adds even more to the image.

When Thomas uses long sequences of words in a recurring pattern, he always strives to surprise his audience. In the passage quoted above, Thomas begins with the obvious, "bread is baking, pigs are grunting". By the end of the passage, however, Thomas has gone beyond the obvious. The hard sounds of "dogs shout" and the fricative "saws sing" are carefully chosen to portray the music of dogs and saws.

Singing also plays a substantial part in the music of Under Milk Wood. Before introducing Polly Garter's song, First Voice reminds the audience that "the morning is all singing". Polly's song is a simple ballad telling the story of men she has known and loved:

I loved a man whose name was Tom  
 He was strong as a bear and two yards long  
 I loved a man whose name was Dick  
 He was big as a barrel and three feet thick  
 And I loved a man whose name was Harry  
 Six feet tall and sweet as a cherry  
 But the one I loved best awake or asleep  
 Was little Willy Wee and he's six feet deep. 25

The rhythm and rhyme of her song are very regular, but the sentiments are real. When we look closely at the rhymes, we see that Thomas tends to down-play them. He uses two half-rhymes between two full rhymes, but more importantly,

the rhymes contribute to the meaning of the song. The coupling of "Tom and "long", of "Dick" and "thick", and of "Harry" and "cherry" emphasizes the important physical characteristics of these men. Polly Garter emphasizes the sheer bulk of "Tom, Dick and Harry who were tall as trees", but in spite of this, the man she loved best was "little Willy Wee". Thomas uses the irony carefully to reinforce the strength of her feeling for little Willy.

Polly Garter's song returns in snatches, right to the end of the play. By simple repetition, Thomas emphasizes the depth of feeling which exists between Polly and Willy. Second Voice introduces another verse of her song with "pretty Polly hums and longs". The warmth of "hums", and the coldness of "longs", capture the despair that Polly feels. She loves little Willy, but he's dead:

Now when farmers' boys on the first fair day  
 Come down from the hills to drink and be gay,  
 Before the sun sinks I'll lie there in their arms  
 Far they're good bad boys from the lonely farms,  
 But I always think as we tumble into bed  
 Of little Willy Wee who is dead, dead, dead... 26

The repetition of "dead", and the rhyme with "bed" create a strong emotional focus. This is intensified by Thomas's direction for silence at the end of the verse. The powerful sincerity of Polly's relationship with Willy Wee provides a clear link with the relationship between Captain Cat and Rosie Probert. Although both Willie and Rosie are dead, they both produce a strong, emotional reaction from the audience.

The dialogue between Captain Cat and Rosie Probert was Thomas's favourite part of the play, and Daniel Jones identifies this passage as an example of "fine poetry".<sup>27</sup> It has the simple eloquence of Lily Small's poem, but the dialogue gives it a double focus of sound and meaning.

Rosie belongs to the world of memory, and her voice is soft and dreamy, while Captain Cat is of the real world, and replies in hard, direct prose:

Rosie (softly): What seas did you see,  
                   Tom Cat, Tom Cat,  
                   In your sailing days  
                   Long long ago?  
                   What sea beasts were  
                   In the wavery green  
                   When you were my master?

Captain Cat: I'll tell you the truth.  
                   Seas barking like seals,  
                   Blue seas and green,  
                   Seas covered with eels  
                   And mermen and whales.       28

The dialogue takes the form of question and answer, of Rosie wondering aloud, and Captain Cat filling in the details. Rosie's language associated the sea with exotic fantasies with "beasts" and with the "wavery green sea". "Wavery" cleverly imitates the soft, dreamy picture that Rosie has of the sea. Captain Cat, however, is concerned with the truth. He uses a lot of hard and slithery sounds. The repetition of "seas" suggests the foaming surf, while "Barking like seals" and "covered with eels" suggest the paradox of tough, physical animals which

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27 Under Milk Wood p. xii.

28 Ibid, p.64.

exist in an all-encompassing liquid environment.

The association of soft and hard sounds, of solid and liquid, suggests a clear sexual parallel. The sea is a constant source of fascination and pleasure to the Captain, and Rosie is to be equally enjoyed:

Lie down, lie easy.  
Let me shipwreck in your thighs. 29

The use of "shipwreck" suggests that the dialogue with Rosie brings Captain Cat close to death, and that sex is a constant reminder of the mortality of human life.

Rosie's final words bring tears to Captain Cat's eyes. She reminds him of death, and he longs for her to return from the grave:

Remember her.  
She is forgetting.  
The earth which filled her mouth  
Is vanishing from her.  
Remember me.  
I have forgotten you.  
I am going into the darkness of the darkness for ever.  
I have forgotten that I was ever born. 30

In death, Rosie loses her memory, and eventually loses all trace of her existence. Her language is simple and stark, and the use of short, fragmented sentences emphasizes this. The shift from "forgetting" and "vanishing" to "forgotten" clearly underlines the journey back into darkness. These lines are full of emotional intensity, but Thomas

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29 Under Milk Wood p.65.

30 Ibid, p. 65-66.

creates his lament out of simple language and sounds.

The arrival of "dusk" is announced by First Voice. Thomas fully exploits the music inherent in that simple four-letter word.

Now the town is dusk. Each cobble, donkey, goose and gooseberry street is a thoroughfare of dusk; and dusk and ceremonial dust, and night's first darkening snow, and the sleep of birds, drift under and through the live dusk of this place of love. Llarregub is the capital of dusk. 31

Thomas uses "dusk" as both a noun and an adjective, and he uses the noun in several unusual ways. He emphasizes the music of the word, the plosive "d", the short vowel, the fricative "s" and the hard stop on "k". Because of the short vowel, the aural impact of the word is in the "sk" ending. The coupling of "dusk" with "dust", and the use of "first", "drift" and "sleep" underline this pattern of fricative followed by stop. These words all suggest the end of a day, and the approach of a closing cadence.

Most of the final section is a recapitulation of themes, characters and sounds. Eli Jenkins recites his sunset poem to Llarregub Hill. Jack Black "grinds his night-teeth" before heading off "into the already sinning dusk." The hard consonants emphasize the heaviness of hell which surrounds Jack. As dusk recedes into night, he prepares for more nightmares and dark images of sin.

The music of night is introduced by First Voice:

It is all at once night now. The windy town is a hill of windows, and from the larrupped waves the lights of the lamps in the windows call back the day and the dead that have run away to sea. All over the calling dark, babies and old men are bribed and lullabied to sleep. 32

There is the music of women's voices as they sing lullabies to their loved ones. There is the music of an accordion, as the drinkers and their girls dance, "the Dance of the World". In a corner of the Sailor's Arms, Mr. Waldo sings a lonely song of love, and sweeping chimneys. Organ Morgan sees J.S. Bach lying on a tombstone, but it turns out to be Cherry Owen who's had a few too many. The final music, however, is left to Polly Garter and First Voice.

As Polly and Mr. Waldo hug in the wood, Polly reminds the audience of her one true love:

But I always think as we tumble into bed  
Of little Willy Wee who is dead, dead, dead. 33

This is an intensely poignant moment. Thomas does not allow his audience any escape from the convincing depth of feeling which Polly conveys. The final lines simply add a kind of blessing to Polly's sentiments:

The thin night darkens. A breeze from the creased water sighs the streets close under Milk waking Wood. 34

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32 Under Milk Wood. p. 75.

33 Ibid, p. 79.

34 Ibid, p. 79,

The thin, quiet sounds of night have returned, and when Eli Jenkins adds his benediction, the music of the play fades into the sighing breeze and the waking wood. The audience does not need to be told to listen. Thomas's language insists that the listeners use their ears, and respond to the music accordingly.



## CHAPTER VII

## CONCLUSION

When Thomas died in 1953, Under Milk Wood had only just been completed. The next step for Thomas was to write a libretto for a new Stravinsky opera, but when he died, the collaboration with Stravinsky had not even begun. Thomas was clearly becoming more aware of the exciting possibilities inherent in combining his writing with music. Unfortunately, though, his early death meant that Under Milk Wood is his only work which makes direct use of music.

In this thesis, I have examined Thomas's early poetry, his late poetry, his public reading, and his play for voices. In all of this writing, it is abundantly evident that Thomas loved the sounds of words:

The first thing was to feel and know their sound  
and substance; what I was going to do with  
these words, what use I was going to make of them,  
what I was going to say through them, would  
come later.<sup>1</sup>

As I have shown, Thomas used sounds more subtly and carefully in his later work. He was able to say more through words, and to express a greater range of themes and feelings. Thomas's ability to use language as a musical medium is evident in all of his work, but as he matured as a writer, the music become more lucid and refined.

It is important to realise that whatever Thomas wrote had to sound right:

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1 Poetic Manifesto p. 155.

What I like to do is to treat words as a craftsman does his wood or stone or what-have-you, to hear, carve, mould, coil, polish and place them into patterns, sequences, sculptures, fugues of sound expressing some lyrical impulse, some spiritual doubt or conviction... <sup>2</sup>

The act of composing poetry was often a tortuous process and as Thomas became more aware of his ability to create special effects through sound, it became even more difficult. Thomas worked intermittently on Under Milk Wood for almost ten years. Many of his later poems were worked, and re-worked for months.

It was on the public platform, however, that Thomas discovered a degree of freedom. He was able to use his voice to exploit and explore the sounds of words, and to turn language into music. He was able to emphasize the words and associations of words which mattered most to him. He was also able to draw on the imagination of his audience and to insist that they hear and feel the smallest morsels of sound. It was in their minds that the illumination of music had to begin, and it is in our minds that the process still goes on.

<sup>2</sup> Poetic Manifesto p. 155.

## APPENDIX

| <u>Plosives</u> | <u>Stops</u>          | <u>Nasals</u> | <u>Semi-vowels</u> | <u>Liquids</u> | <u>Fricatives</u> |
|-----------------|-----------------------|---------------|--------------------|----------------|-------------------|
| b, p            | $\bar{b}$ , $\bar{p}$ | m             | w                  | l, r           | h, f              |
| d, t            | $\bar{d}$ , $\bar{t}$ | n             |                    |                | v, th             |
| g, k            | $\bar{g}$ , $\bar{k}$ | ng            |                    |                | s, sh             |
|                 |                       |               |                    |                | z, ch             |
|                 |                       |               |                    |                | j, dg             |

This appendix is a symplified form of a Table in  
Speech and the Hearing-Impaired Child: Theory and Practice  
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